STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST WEEKLY

DEC. 16, '39

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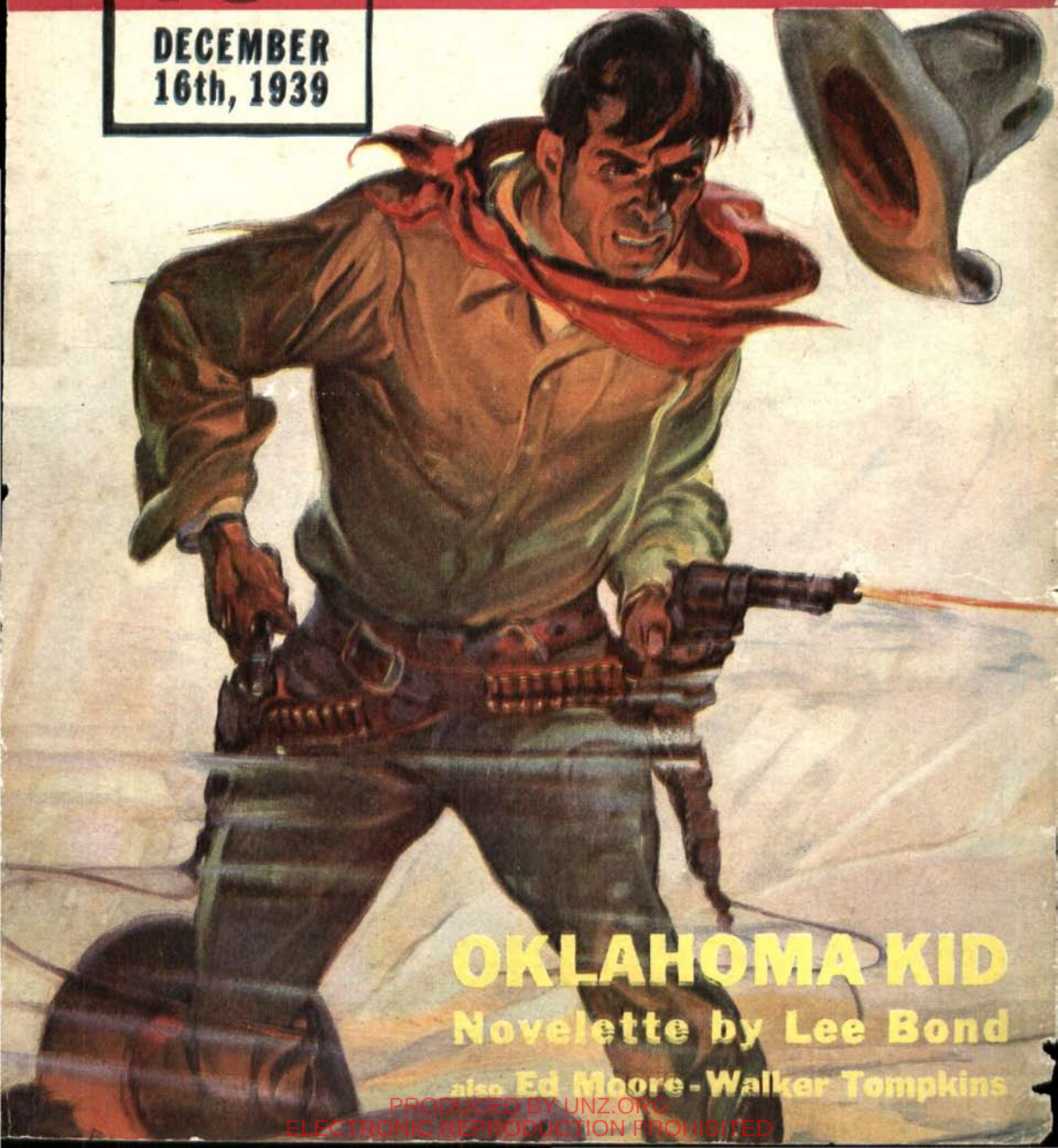
DECEMBER 16th, 1939



## OKLAHOMA KID

Novelette by Lee Bond

also Ed Moore - Walker Tompkins

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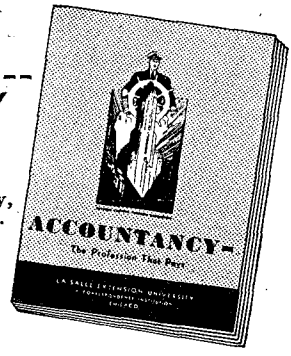


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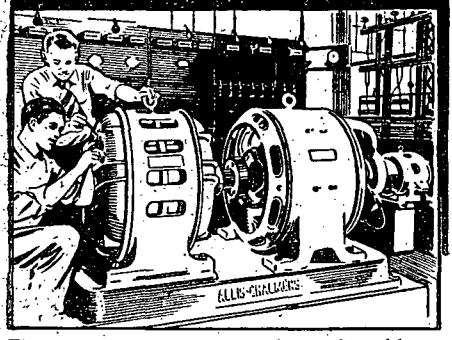

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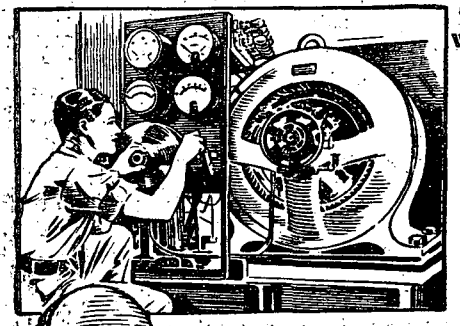

H. C. Lewis

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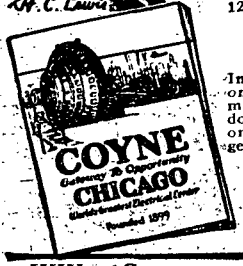


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STREET & SMITH'S

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# WILD WEST WEEKLY

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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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$2 Six Months
$4 per YEAR

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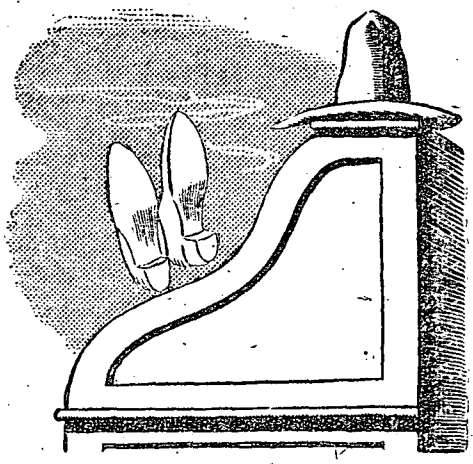

# A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

YOUR old amigo, the Oklahoma Kid, returns to the fields of rangeland combat in this issue. He's always been a very popular hombre with you 3W readers. Though plumb homely of countenance, the Kid has the qualities we all admire in a man: a sense of justice and honor, the courage and humanity to help the weak or downtrodden. I got an idea you'll be as glad to see him back as we editor galoots are.

Ed Moore, who writes the novelette in this week's spread, is a newcomer to Wild West Weekly. Inasmuch as he's done a bang-up job on "Red Guns At Sunrise," it seems fitting he should spout a few words about himself:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I ran across the counterpart of Roaring Red Ramsey on, of all places, a Hollywood movie lot. He was no actor, but a working cowhand who had ridden the chuck line into Hollywood and was making "coffee and" working as an extra in Western pictures. When I met him he was wearing false whiskers and prop six-guns, but when I got to know him I realized he was a spiritual descendant of the boys who used to ride the owlhoot with a posse on the backtrail and sudden death in either hand. He was the saltiest gent I ever ran across. His strength was unbelievable and he had a diabolical sense of humor which he vented in no uncertain terms on pseudo-Westerners working in Western pictures. And yet I once saw him give his last cent to a bum he had never seen before. Of course, a short while later he rolled a drunk to recoup his losses, but that was Roaring Red.

I used to meet a lot of cowhands working as extras in pictures—the same boys I'd meet on trips through all parts of the West. The former, feet sore from tromping from studio to studio on high-heeled boots, would have given anything to be back on the range even riding drag in the dust—but, of course, the latter all wanted a whirl at the legendary gold and bright lights. Thus it was ever and it seems as though the Roaring Reds of another day got a taste of it all—excitement, high adventure, not a little gold, and always plenty of trouble riding them hard.

As for my personal history: Born in Alabama some time after the stars allegedly fell, but on a Friday the 13th nevertheless; left college in the belief that there were more peaceful pursuits than getting bones broken playing football; went to sea for a while, but a trick at the wheel during a storm in which the ship was taking water down the stack was not the quietest life known to man; wheeling an emergency ambulance through the streets of Mobile was all right until the ambulance and a street car reached the same corner at the same moment; after getting out of the hospital took Greeley's advice and went West to play a few parts on the stage, but kept tripping over a Southern accent, which is a good way not to eat regularly; had been pounding the typewriter regularly through the years, finally sold a few movie scripts, and thereafter wrote on several studio lots; took long treks inland, learned to know and love the real West, and finally escaped from Hollywood positive that there are worse things than storms at sea, ambulance wrecks, and scarcity of meals; came East and worked as associate editor on a magazine; have sold considerable copy to Western mags over the years.

Sincerely, ED MOORE.

I reckon you ought to sell a heap more, Moore, with all that back-

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ground to work on—and when you can write thataway.

A note from a reader:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading Wild West Weekly for a number of years—in fact, ever since "The Black Saddle," a Circle J yarn, appeared. I don't have any criticizing to do. So here are my favorites: Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Circle J, Señor Red Mask, and last but not least, the Black Ace. I think your best cover artist is Scott.

Well, I reckon I'll sign off, till Señor Red Mask shoots Buck Foster.

Yores, THE ARIZONA KID.
Winter Garden, Fla.

Much obliged, Arizona. But I wish you compadres weren't so shy about lettin' off steam on stuff that sets crosswise of yore craws. There must be somethin' now and then that you don't like. I'm still requestin' you to cut loose and complain about something once in a while. It's your magazine as much as ours. Most of you've been loyal customers for a long spell, and you certainly have the right to belly-ache. This is one country where free speech still prevails.

Next week we're handin' you a very special issue. It's the one week of the year when kindness, good humor, tolerance, and generosity prevail. Or *should* prevail.

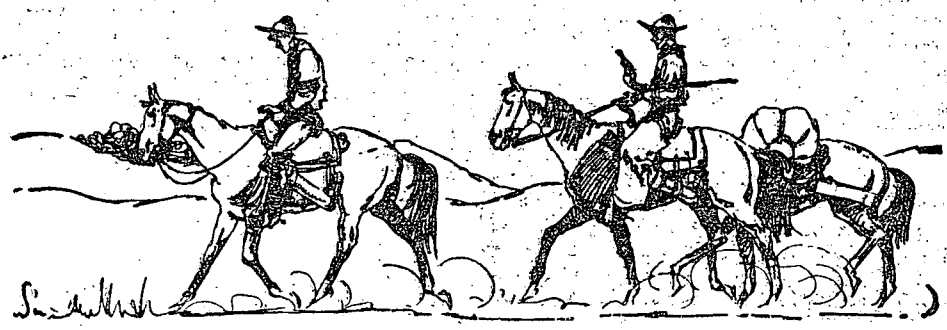
Our first Christmas offering in that issue will be a complete novel, "Deacon Wildcat," by a new writer named Mark Lish. We rate him a real gift to the 3W spread, even if he ain't wrapped in cellophane and fancy red ribbons. Most any editor would have turned a couple handsprings to find this yarn in his sock.

"Christmas Six-guns," by Cleve Endicott, features the Circle J outfit in plumb exciting doin's, with a special holiday payoff. Then "Santa Rides South," by Dean McKinley, features Blackstone Bangs and Judge Roy Bean in another seasonal tale that has a heap of flavor.

And to make sure you're getting full fare, we're offering the first part of a new and better picture story, "Omaha Hooker on the Oregon Trail," plus a number of short stories, a generous serving of Walker Tompkins' great continued novel and features. Looks as if the galoot who sticks his thumb into the newsstand pie and comes up with Wild West Weekly will be getting the best plum there is. If you think I'm a liar, send me a cactus-stuffed sofa to sit on from now till *next* Christmas.

Time now for me to go practice harnessin' my reindeer. Editor of a detective magazine in a nearby office knows some Eastern gangsters and wants me to take him and them for a slay-ride. (That's the worst I can do this week.) Adios.

THE RANGE BOSS.



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BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY
MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING
LOOK HERE. N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS ACTUALLY FUN. I'M ALREADY MAKING $5 TO $10 A WEEK IN SPARE TIME. RADIO CERTAINLY OFFERS OPPORTUNITY TO WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS. YOU SEE, I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
OH JIM. IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS
YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

# I Trained These Men

**Chief Operator Broadcasting Station**

"When I completed 20 lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator."
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## *in your spare time for a*
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National Radio Institute
Established 25 years

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### Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. *Many Radio Technicians open their own* Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. *Automobile*, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. *Television* promises to open good jobs soon.

### Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

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Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare-time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have *trained, telling what they are doing and* earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

**J. E. Smith, President**
**Dept. 9ND, National Radio Institute**
**Washington, D. C.**

## *Mail this to get 64 page book FREE*

THIS BOOK has shown hundreds how to MAKE MORE MONEY

**J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 9ND,**
**National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your *64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out* Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly.)

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Short stories by Jack Kofoed, Robert N. Bryan, T. W. Ford and Arthur J. Daley, and "The Tennessee System," by Allyn McKeen.

**Athlete** **Now 10c, on sale Dec. 15.**


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# BUZZARDS FLY SOUTH

## an Oklahoma Kid Novelette

by LEE BOND

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# BUZZARDS FLY SOUTH

***Axed, the dead man lay before him—the first prey of an unknown murder monster.***

## By Lee Bond

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE KID BLOCKS A FRAME-UP.

FEW things could shake the case-hardened nerves of Jack Reese, outlaw. But he shuddered now as if someone had dumped a tub of ice water over his wiry body.

He sat his chunky bay horse in a V-shaped pass, looking out and down into a shallow valley where sickly mesquites grew in discouraged clumps along a thin trickle of water. There was a sluice box directly below him, and a mound of wet sand and gravel beside a pit. A shovel stuck upright in the mound of damp gravel. And just beyond the dirt that would have been worked down the sluice by the miner were two men. One of them lay face down upon the earth, arms and legs spread wide. The other man stood above the prone figure, a pick upraised.

When the pick came flashing down Jack Reese shuddered and cursed his own stupidity in not understanding what was up in time to stop the ghastly thing. Reese expected to see the prone man writhe when the glistening pick swished down. But the man did not move, and the fellow who had driven the pick into his back stepped aside, dragging a Stetson from his head and sleeving sweat from his face. The fellow stood looking down at the man from whose back the pick protruded, and Reese cursed the cold-bloodedness of the hellion who could stand looking upon his handiwork.

"Damned buzzard!" the watching outlaw gritted. "The gent on the ground was already dead or he'd have moved when that pick dug into his back. But Spindly-legs wanted to make *sure* he was done for."

The man Reese had called Spindly-legs was turning now, tugging his hat on as he moved to a gunny sack a few feet away. He reached into the sack, drew out a crumpled felt hat, and tossed it down, tromped it, then kicked it over toward the dead man. Then he tucked the sack under his left arm, and started off down the little valley.

Reese saw a saddled horse standing two or three hundred yards below the walking man and knew that the hombre was heading for the bronc. And suddenly Reese's spurs bit down, and the bay under him came to life with an explosive snort. The man down in the valley looked up at the ridge, startled by the sudden clatter of hoofs.

Reese's beady black eyes gleamed and his thin lips pulled into a bitter grin. "Run, damn you!" he whooped. "But it'll do you little good."

The fellow in the valley was running, all right, his tall and narrow body shoved forward from snaky

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hips, his thin legs churning madly. Reese laughed when the man slipped and almost fell in loose sand. He laughed, too, when the badly frightened killer yanked a gun and began slamming bullets toward him.

There was an ivory-butted gun snuggled against each of Jack Reese's slim thighs, supported by cartridge-studded belts which spanned his narrow waist. But he did not reach for either of those guns. He simply watched the racing, shooting man below him out of those close-set black eyes with much the same expression a wise old lobo watches a clumsily galloping calf.

Reese was slanting along the side of the hill now, dropping gradually lower, yet paralleling the valley rather than riding directly into it. The man below him saw what was happening, for his voice came in a shrill yell of frightened protest, and his legs pumped all the harder. But Reese rode down into the valley a good thirty yards ahead of the man—between the fellow and the waiting horse.

Reese hopped out of the saddle, slapped his bay on the flank and sent the horse on a few rods. The running man had drawn a second gun now. He came plunging on, shooting. Reese felt the snick of a bullet brushing the brim of his gray Stetson, and another ripped through the slack of his yellow shirt, burning his side. His own hands dropped then, and from the level of his right hip powder flame licked out in a red stream.

The running man stumbled, dropped to his knees. His hawkish face was a dirty-white color. He lifted his guns, thumbs hooking at knurled hammers.

"Stop it, you fool!" Reese yelled. "Drop them irons, or I'll drop yuh!"

"You seen me!" the man before him squealed, and the guns in his hands steadied, their spiked hammers rocking back.

Jack Reese dropped both gun hammers then, and the kneeling killer rocked backward, blasting twin shots into the sky.

"Crazy fool!" the outlaw muttered, and reloaded two chambers of his right-hand Colt as he stalked toward the fallen hombre.

The tall and spindly gent was shuddering, yet his movements were purely reflex actions. The man was dead, and a bitterness crept into Reese's hard face as he gazed down at him.

He had singed the man's right thigh with that first shot, hoping to stop him, scare him into dropping his guns. But the bluff had not worked. It had been kill or be killed. Yet Reese regretted the necessity of it.

He squatted on his heels, gingerly flipped back the brush jacket the man wore. Blood was darkening a spot over the fellow's heart, soaking the cloth of the gray flannel shirt. There were two black bullet holes through the cloth where the blood was spreading.

Reese lifted the hat that had fallen from the dead man's head, started to cover the hombre's face. But he hesitated, looking sharply at the sweatband inside the hat. The name "Vic Silvert" was stamped inside the new and expensive Stetson. The initials V. S., Reese saw, were worked out in fancy stitching on the front of the man's half boots. This Vic Silvert's clothing was of the best, the guns he had dropped were fancy with inlay work of gold and silver. The shell-studded belts slanting about his thin hips were expensive things, supporting hand-tooled holsters that had cost a pretty penny.

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Reese saw those things in the few brief moments he squatted there. Then he covered Vic Silvert's face with the fine hat and stood up.

Jack Reese was scowling bleakly as he walked back to his horse. This was Old Mexico. The man he had shot was an American, and the Sonora authorities were not exactly in the habit of paying much attention to gringo troubles. But the sort of money Vic Silvert had obviously spent on clothes and equipment did not grow on bushes. With money like that to spend, it was a reasonable guess that Silvert would have a following of some sort.

Reese mounted his bay, scanned the weathered hills about him for a moment, then rode back past Vic Silvert's body to the body of the man into which Silvert had driven a pick. He dismounted and again squatted on his heels.

The man he stared down upon now was grizzled and stocky, dressed in the rough garb of the men who ceaselessly tramped the wild desert regions in search of gold. Yet this man was no ordinary prospector. One of his hands had twisted over, was lying palm up. The palm showed recently broken blisters, and the ridged lumps of calluses in the making. Both the fellow's muscular forearms bore the fiery-red color and scaling skin of recent sunburn.

Reese grasped the pick, tugged the terrible weapon from the man's back. He tossed it aside, slipped a hand under the dead man, turned him gently over. And as he did so Reese felt a swollen lump beneath the palm he had slid beneath the body. He looked into the man's square-jawed face and saw again the telltale marks of recent exposure to the desert's biting sun.

"This hombre is no regular prospector," the outlaw mused. "A week or ten days ago he was pretty soft."

Reese unbuttoned the man's sweat-soaked shirt and undershirt, and found the lump his palm had pressed against. The lump was a swollen bulge just over the heart, loose and flabby to the touch. Then Reese pressed harder on the swollen place, and his fingers found a round, solid object.

"A bullet, by thunder," he exclaimed. "Vic Silvert shot this gent first, then drove that pick into his back. I wonder—"

And wondering, Reese turned the body again, his eyes keenly alive now. The pick had been driven into the bullet hole that had bored through shirt, undershirt and into yielding flesh. But for that swollen lump on the man's breast no one would ever have guessed that a bullet, and not the pick, had slain the fellow.

Reese stood up, his eyes scanning the bank of the little stream. He saw a new, stiff-brimmed hat lying beside the sluice box. That hat, he realized, had belonged to the dead man—been on his head, no doubt, when the bullet knocked him down. Then Reese remembered the hat he had watched Vic Silvert take from a gunny sack, tromp into the sand, then kick toward the corpse. He saw the hat now, a small and cheap affair of black felt.

He went to the hat, lifted it up. It had but one distinguishing feature—a dollar-sized silver concha that was fastened to the outside band at the base of the hat's low crown. Reese ran the ball of his thumb across the ornament when he saw traces of lettering upon the concha. Freed of dust, the name Juan Amado showed plainly now.

Jack Reese stood for long moments, his agile brain digesting what his keen eyes saw. This hat, with

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another man's name upon it, deliberately planted at the scene of a cold-blooded murder. The pick, driven into the bullet wound in the dead man's body. Reese's lean face drew into hard lines as he saw the significance of those two things. And something about that pick had been stirring vaguely in the back of his mind ever since he saw it. He walked back to where the pick lay and looked down at it. He knew then what had been sticking there in his mind concerning this tool.

It was a big, long-handled pick such as might be found in regular mines, rather than the shorter handled, much lighter type of pick prospectors would carry around on a pack burro. The handle in the pick was new, and the tines had recently been sharpened.

Reese nodded gravely, then moved on to a camp which lay fifty yards up the little stream. Duffel was scattered wildly about, flour and coffee bags had been slit open, and even baking powder and salt cans had been emptied.

"So that's it," Reese grunted finally. "Vic Silvert murdered this man, ransacked the fella's camp. Then Silvert left this hat, figurin' to let Juan Amado, whoever that is, get blamed for the killin'. An' that big pick Silvert drove into the dead hombre's back. Somethin' tells me that pick would add further proof that this Juan Amado done the killin' an' robbin' here. But if this hat, an' the pick, was to disappear—"

Reese let his voice trail off. There was a hard smile tugging at his thin lips as he rode away a few minutes later. Lashed atop the bedroll behind the cantle of his saddle was the blood-stained pick he had pulled from the dead man's back. And tucked carelessly under the crossed cartridge belts about Reese's middle was the small black hat with the silver concha.

## CHAPTER II.

### TROUBLE IN PICACHO.

THE town of Picacho was hog wild and getting wilder. Nestled in a shallow sink, surrounded by tall dun hills, it had been a sleepy little Mexican village three short months ago. But now it was a roaring boom town, peopled by gold-mad men of every race, color and creed. Tents and crude brush-walled shacks had sprung up around the original handful of adobe buildings until the tiny town with its dreamy atmosphere of eternal peace was completely lost in the lusty wildness of the boom.

Fred Osborne, one of the wealthiest and most successful mine operators in the West, had bought a great block of property in the new discovery and already had a stamp mill built and five mines working full tilt. But there were other outfits, from independent operators of small mines down to common prospectors swarming out into the hills, ripping precious gold from the sere earth.

Jack Reese considered those things as he jogged lazily into the

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outskirts of the brawling camp. He worked his way through shacks and tents and crude brush shelters to come finally into the Picacho he had known of old. The few adobe buildings looked pitifully alone, and somehow forlorn in all the wild confusion about them.

Men thronged the dirt walks, their voices lifted in shout and song of elation. Horsemen, like Reese, jogged along the dusty roadway between the double row of old adobes, threading their way past freight outfits, rumbling ore wagons, buggies and buckboards. Brown men, black men, yellow men and white. And dust. A stinking, stinging pall of alkali hung in the air. It lay in a whitish mantle upon the old buildings. It clung to the clothes and the skins of men, and Reese cursed the dust and noise and the gold that had turned a place of mellow sunshine and sweet peace into this roaring hell in which he now found himself.

He singled out, finally, the old cantina he had visited on other occasions, but spent five minutes finding an empty niche under a pepper tree at the side of the building where he could leave his horse. He swung down from the saddle, his eyes bleak as he stood for a moment, listening to the life throb of the town. The pick was no longer lashed behind his saddle. Nor was the black hat with its damning silver concha tucked under his cartridge belts.

Reese turned out into the current of rushing, howling humanity along the walk, and felt himself jostled and bumped, pushed and prodded along in the mad stream. He worked his way to the door of the cantina at last, however, and stepped gratefully up into the doorway. But his hopes of a moment's peace were immediately shattered, for the room was packed from wall to wall by shouting, cursing men who fought each other for space at the bar and at the half a dozen gambling layouts that were scattered over the room.

The place stank of sweat and whiskey and tobacco, and Reese made a wry face, turned back through the door to the dusty hot air and swarming humanity of the street. He made his way to the corner of the cantina, and turned off into the vacant space where his bay stood in the shade of the big pepper tree. He saw a man hurrying down the vacant stretch toward the street —a slender, well-dressed man whose rather handsome face showed considerable agitation. Reese saw, too, that a young Mexican was running behind the well-dressed man, and heard the Mexican's voice break out sharply.

"Señor Cramer!" the Mexican called. "If you please, señor, I want a word with you."

The man who had been addressed as Cramer whirled tigerishly, his face livid, his lips curling in anger as he glared at the Mexican.

"Keep away from me, Pablo!" Cramer ordered harshly. "I'm not interested in what you may have to say."

"But my brother, señor!" Pablo cried in anguish. "He is innocent. By the good Dios, I swear it. He did not—"

Cramer's fist lashed out in a blow that upset Pablo, sent him sprawling upon the earth.

"That for you, greaser!" He spat at the fallen man.

"And that for you, gringo!" Reese purred.

Cramer spun in that cat-quick manner that was his. Reese smashed a brown fist hard against the man's chin and watched out of grim eyes while Cramer struck the earth in a

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*He smashed the jasper plumb in the mouth and set him back on his haunches!*

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sprawling back flip. Cramer's soft hat flew off, and he lay blinking dazed blue eyes up through a tangle of brown hair that fell down over his forehead and into his face. Reese stood above him, watching the slow trickle of blood that spilled from the nostrils of his thin-bridged nose.

Cramer sat up, pulled a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his well-tailored coat and daubed at the blood without taking his eyes off the man who had struck him. "You are Mexican?" he asked slowly.

With his keen black eyes, jetty hair, and skin burned to a rich brown by desert wind and sun, Reese could easily enough have passed for either Mexican or at least part Indian. But at Cramer's question he shook his head, said:

"I happen to be an American. I just didn't like the way you treated the lad who done nothin' worse than ask for a word with you."

Color swept up into Cramer's cheeks, and he came to his feet, blue eyes sharp and thinned as he dusted off his hat, yet kept his gaze on Reese.

"You, an American, took the part of that damned gr—" he began, but broke off when Reese crouched, cocked a fist.

Pablo, the Mexican, was on his feet now, staring dazedly from Reese to Cramer.

"You got knocked through yore hat for usin' that word 'greaser,'" Reese droned. "If you're the sort who hates Mexicans, why the hell are you down here in their country?"

Reese heard booted feet thumping the earth, and glanced sidewise without turning his head. He saw two men hurrying toward him. They were Americans, and their hands hovered over holstered six-guns as they advanced. Reese felt an old, keening wave of tightening nerves. He shifted in a single motion so that the two advancing men and Cramer were all under his watchful eyes.

"What's the trouble here, Mr. Cramer?" one of the advancing fellows called.

They were halting now, their hands resting on gun butts, their very air that of men who needed but slight excuse for drawing and using those guns.

Reese held his head pitched forward and down, studying the two men from beneath the sloping brim of his gray Stetson. They were scowling at him, trying to see his face. Their eyes ran down to his low-slung guns, then up to the slanting hat brim beneath which they could see little more than a thin-lipped mouth that curved down at the outside corners, and a blunt chin.

Jack Reese was laughing inwardly, yet he knew no feeling of mirth. He recognized those two men, and felt again that swift tightening of his nerves that sharpened his every sense.

The lank man with sandy hair and slanted green eyes was Tom Brail. The other, a burly, red-muzzled fellow with carroty hair, was Buck Nally. They were professional gunmen and notorious horse thieves from across the line, and Reese knew that, like himself, the reaching arm of the American law often drove them here to these sun-bathed hills and silent valleys of Mexico.

"Yes, there's trouble," Cramer was snapping. "This man knocked me down."

"Yeah?" Buck Nally growled, and hunched his big shoulders, let his broad hands roll tightly about the butts of the twin guns he wore.

"Yeah," Reese droned. "You an' Tom want to argue about it, Buck?"

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Reese lifted his head as he spoke.

Buck Nally took his hands off the guns he was gripping. Tom Brail whistled softly and let his own hands fall away from pistol grips. Cramer saw their hands fall from guns, and saw uneasiness sweep over their hard-bitten faces.

"What the devil!" he exploded. "Tom, you and Buck act like you were afraid of this fellow. He knocked me down, I tell you. He clouted me simply because I had put this greaser in—"

Reese leaned lithely behind the fist he sent smashing up and out. Cramer took two wobbly steps backward, lost his balance, and sat down, blood coming in quick spurts from his nose.

"You learn mighty slow, Cramer," Reese said dryly. "Don't ever call a Mexican 'greaser' when I'm within hearin'. Think you can remember that?"

There was no heat in his voice, no hint of threat or anger. Yet something in those boring black eyes brought a shudder to Cramer, who was holding his handkerchief to his nose and getting shakily to his feet.

"Damn you, handle him!" Cramer ordered Tom Brail and Buck Nally. "Are you two goin' to stand there and let him make fools of you?"

"We better let the matter drop, Louis," Tom Brail advised in a thin-toned voice.

"Sure, we better let the matter lay as she is," Buck Nally seconded.

"Let it drop?" Louis Cramer choked. "Why, you fools, look at all those people yonder on the walk, starin' at us. The word will go the rounds that *you* two let this . . . this devil thump me around and were afraid to do anything about it. You'll be branded yellow."

"Not likely." Tom Brail sounded almost patient. He squinted at the dandified man, then rolled an uneasy glance toward Reese. "Yuh see, Louis, this gent happens to be the Oklahoma Kid. You've heard of him, ain't you?"

Louis Cramer obviously had heard of the Oklahoma Kid. His cheeks went pale and he backed up a step, sharp eyes keenly appraising as he looked the outlaw over.

"I see," he muttered finally, and turned hastily away, heading for the throng that had spread from the walk out into the vacant piece of ground.

"Buck an' me will likely be seein' you, in case you aim to stick around a spell, Kid," Tom Brail said thinly.

He and Buck Nally followed Cramer off into the crowd along the walk, and Reese was looking after them, aware that there had been a veiled threat in Brail's last remark.

Pablo came to the outlaw's side, and the Mexican's face looked worried. "You have trouble now, señor." He spoke gravely. "I am sorry, for the fault it is mine."

Reese chuckled. "Forget it, amigo. I reckon them gents won't give me too much grief. You didn't get to have that word with Cramer, though."

Pablo's lips trembled, and suddenly tears filled his dark eyes. "My brother," he choked, and would have turned away had not Reese caught him by the arm.

"Hold on, Pablo. What is it about yore brother?"

"They are killing him." Pablo's voice was a sob. "He cannot stand another such beating as they gave him a while ago."

"Here, lad, talk sense," Reese ordered. "Who beats yore brother, and why is he beaten?"

"Señor Brail and Señor Cramer, they do the beating." Pablo half sobbed the words. "They come to

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the First Strike Mine, where my brother an' I are working in the tunnel. They are very angry, an' Señor Brail says, 'Juan Amado, you are a murderer!' They take Juan then—"

"Juan Amado?" Reese cried.

Pablo looked startled at the sharpness of the outlaw's voice. "Si, that is my brother's name," he said. "I am Pablo Amado."

Reese's dark eyes were glowing, and there was a husky note in his voice when he asked the next question.

"Brail and Cramer accused yore brother of murder, eh, Pablo?"

"Yes," Pablo choked. "They beat him and took him to the great house on the hill where Señor Osborne and Señor Cramer live. They beat him some more, telling him he must confess to the murder of some hombre named Charlie Doyle, a prospector. An hombre named Vic Silvert says he saw Juan murder the prospector. But they are wrong. Juan—"

"When did this happen?" Reese cut in tensely. "When does Vic Silvert claim he seen yore brother do murder? And where was the murder done?"

Pablo was so upset that Reese had to start over, ask one question at a time. But he finally had the thing straight in his mind, and there were cold lights of grim triumph glinting in his black eyes.

Tom Brail and Louis Cramer had come to the first discovery shortly after the eight-o'clock shift started working that morning, dragged Juan Amado from the tunnel, accusing him of murdering a man named Charlie Doyle. Reese learned from Pablo that Vic Silvert ran with Cramer, Tom Brail and Buck Nally, as well as other tough Americans who worked around the mines. The murder, Pablo explained, had been done at Doyle's camp, north of the town a scant three miles. Vic Silvert, Louis Cramer charged, had been riding the ridges just at daylight, and had seen Juan Amado strike Charlie Doyle in the back with a pick, then flee into the hills.

"You head for home, Pablo, an' stay there until I come for you," Reese advised when the youth finished talking. "Yore brother is not guilty. I know that an' hope to prove it. But do not tell anyone what I have said."

Pablo's eyes were shining with gratitude as he wrung the outlaw's hand, then turned to stumble away.

Reese led his chunky bay from beneath the pepper tree, and there was a hard cast to his thin lips as he swung up into the saddle.

"I don't know the ins and outs of this, Shorty hoss, but there's somethin' danged rotten in it," he muttered. "A gent like Cramer wouldn't frame a common laborer for murder without some plenty sound reason. Yet he's frāmin' Juan Amado. It was around eight o'clock when I had that run-in with Vic Silvert out yonder. My hunch is that Silvert was to hightail it back here an' be on hand to swear to that lie about seein' Juan Amado do the murder."

## CHAPTER III.

### JUAN AMADO'S RESCUE.

JACK REESE remembered the "big house on the hill," as it was locally referred to, as a hulking and dismal old hacienda. It had belonged to some long-forgotten don, and was built on a hill overlooking the basin where Picacho lay. On former visits to the then sleepy and peaceful village, Reese had often ridden up to this tall hill where the great old hacienda stood. But as he rode up to it now he whistled in honest amazement.

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The scabby walls had been replastered with adobe mud, and the mud, after drying, had been whitewashed. Window sills and facing had been painted, the weeds and brush were cut away from walls, and the great gate that had once sagged, broken and neglected, between the arch posts, was now hinged and painted.

A man stood before the repaired gate, a husky-shouldered man who held a rifle balanced across a thick left forearm. The man was an American and had the look of a gent who had seen his share of trouble. He turned slightly sidewise in a seemingly careless manner as Reese approached. Yet the rifle across that thick forearm was trained squarely on Reese as he reined in, met the guard's sultry glance.

"Who are you, an' what you want up here?" the guard asked. "Talk up, stranger, or— By 'thunder! The Oklahoma Kid!"

The guard's tawny eyes lost their squint, grew wide in surprise. He licked uneasily at thick lips, then lowered the rifle barrel hastily.

"Well, well!" Reese hummed dryly. "Poke Arnett, or I'm a gopher's gran'ma. Buzzards sure are flying south these days. I run into Buck Nally an' Tom Brail down in town a while ago."

"Buzzards, huh?" Arnett rumbled. "You better hadn't get too bad at callin' names, Kid."

"Huntin' a fight, are you?" Reese retorted. "You always was troublesome, Poke. Accusin' me of callin' you names?"

"Well, you said somethin' about buzzards, didn't you?" Arnett demanded. "Then you went an' mentioned Tom an' Buck. That's callin' names kind of offhand, ain't it?"

"So you do want a scrap!" Reese scowled. "If I go to work an' apologize for any little slight I maybe made accidental, you come right back with more bristles raised. Is that any way to act, Poke?"

Sweat was popping out of Arnett's pores, and his eyes were rolling uneasily. "You didn't apologize or nothin'," he grunted. "Kid, you better—"

"I always hate to fight so early in a day. But you're forcin' it, Poke. Callin' me a liar now, that's what you are."

"But I ain't," Arnett groaned. "Dammit, leave me be. You ain't crowdin' me into no gun ruckus. You'd shoot me before I got a gun half out of leather."

"Me?" Reese raised thin brows as if honestly amazed. "Poke, you sure are tryin' hard to pick a quarrel. What would I want to shoot you for?"

"Leave me be," Arnett snapped. "What fetched you up here, anyhow?"

"Why, I thought I'd come up an' see Fred Osborne," Reese answered. "But of course, if you aim to shoot me up, I reckon I won't be able to ask him for a job or anything like that."

"I ain't aimin' to shoot nobody up," the burly towhead croaked. "Here, get on inside an' quit devilin' me."

He turned as he spoke, leaned the rifle against the wall and flung the broad gate open. Reese dismounted instead of riding through, however, and let his bay's reins trail in the gravel.

"Well, now, it looks like I misjudged yore intentions, Poke," he observed gravely. "But I'll put our fine friendship to one more test. I'll let you mind my horse for me while I'm inside. If you let my horse run off, I'd not only know you don't like



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me much, but I'd take it right unkindly."

Arnett's broad face was almost purple, and raw hell simmered in his eyes. But he swallowed the insult of being left to "mind" the horse as if he were some mere flunky, and contented himself with glowering balefully at the slim back of his tormentor.

Reese stepped into a huge patio, and again whistled in surprise at the change he saw. On his last visit to the old place, this great patio had been a mad tangle of weeds and brush that almost hid the tall fountain out there in the center. But the weeds and brush were gone now, soft green grass grew in broad strips between flower beds and tile walks, and the fountain that had been dry for many years was spouting silvery spray up into the sunlight.

But Reese had little time to enjoy the beauty that had come to the once ruined old place. A shadowy moment under the tiled roof of a walkway which ran along the inside walls of the great square house caught his eye. He turned toward the figures of men he could see more plainly now, and noticed they were grouped before a certain stout door, their hands resting on gun butts as he approached. There were three of them—seedy-appearing Americans, who looked more like range tramps or barroom bums than dangerous gunmen. Reese was not surprised to see them screw whiskery faces into threatening scowls and make an open show of half drawing their guns. Their kind usually made a business of acting tough.

"That'll be far enough, cow nurse," a gangly hombre sneered. "Stand hitched ontil we curry yuh for brands. Poke Arnett ain't supposed to let nobody in here."

"My brand ain't hard to read," Reese told them quietly. "Up across the line I'm called, among other things, the Oklahoma Kid. That satisfy you?"

It did not only satisfy them, but scared them. They jerked their hands away from gun butts, and sneers changed to goggle-eyed uneasiness.

"He . . . he ain't bullin' us," a potbellied little rascal wheezed. "Boys, I've saw his picture on them 'wanted' posters up acrost the line too many times. They offer a young fortune fer his dead-or-alive capture. I've saw them posters in Arizony plenty many times."

"An' likely wanted to collect the money on my scalp, eh?" Reese asked.

The potbellied fellow sounded as if he were strangling. He shook his head, declared wheezingly that no such notion had ever entered his mind.

"All right, let it ride, then," Reese muttered. "I want to see Juan Amado. He's in there?"

Reese jerked a thumb at the stout door before which the trio stood. His guess that Juan Amado was in the room beyond that door was not entirely a shot in the dark. For one thing, he had prowled into that room once, and he knew that it was narrow and windowless. With its three-feet-thick adobe walls and the door of hand-hewn oak, it made an ideal strong room or prison. Besides that, Reese had heard a faint groan, and felt certain that it had come from beyond that massive door.

That his deductions were well-founded he knew now, for the frowzy men who had been guarding the door were stepping aside with alacrity. One of them produced a big key, which Reese fitted into the door's hand-made iron lock. A moment later he was groping into the

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narrow room, moving toward faint sounds that came from the gloom.

"Amado!" he called. "Juan Amado, do yuh hear me?"

"I hear you," a weak voice answered. "But please do not beat me again. I did not do what they say I have done. As Dios is my judge, señor, I am innocent."

The outlaw found the man lying huddled on the floor, bound in a cruelly bent position. The Kid drew a knife, bent above the suffering fellow. And as he bent, Reese's voice came in a swift whisper. Reese spoke in Spanish, explaining briefly that he was a friend, come to help, and that the gun guards about the place must not know the truth of it.

Amado stopped groaning, and a whispered prayer of thanks trembled on his lips as Reese cut the last rope, helped the man to his feet. Then they were outside, and Jack Reese cursed in a snarl of sound as he saw the face of the husky young Mexican he was half carrying.

Amado's eyes stared out from behind mounds of torn, bruise-blackened flesh. His lips were shapeless lumps of swollen and bleeding tissue, and not a place on his cheeks or jaws or forehead could Reese have laid a finger without touching a gash. Amado's hair was a grisly mass of drying blood, and Reese knew that the man's scalp had been as badly bruised as his face.

A door opened just ahead of Reese, and a plump brunette girl in the white cap and uniform of a nurse stepped out upon the tile walk. The nurse stood for one startled moment, looking at the bloody and sagging man Reese was supporting. Then her professional training came to the fore, and she stepped forward, caught Juan Amado's arm in a firm grip. She was both attractive and capable in appearance, and turned questioning brown eyes on Reese as she helped him hold the sick Amado.

"He's been beaten up, ma'am," the outlaw answered her unvoiced question.

"Looks pretty bad, too," she commented quietly.

"You're a nurse, that's easy to see," the outlaw said. "Reckon you could dress the cuts on this boy's head an' face?"

"I could, yes," the nurse answered. "But that will not be necessary. Dr. Denton is here. My guess is that there will have to be some stitches taken."

"Dr. Will Denton, the famous surgeon from Tucson?" Reese asked sharply. "What fetches him down here in this hell hole?"

"Dr. Will Denton, the famous surgeon from Tucson," the nurse replied crisply. "He came here to remove the bullet from Fred Osborne's thigh. That was three weeks ago. Blood poisoning had set in when the doctor and I arrived. It has been a battle."

"Osborne. He's crippled up?" Reese echoed.

"Mr. Osborne has had all one man could do, trying to cheat death," the nurse said levelly. "For two weeks it was touch and go. But he's out of the woods now and improving."

They had been guiding Amado to the door from which the girl had come as they talked. They helped the Mexican up into the doorway now, and, as he followed through, Reese saw that he was in a bedroom which quite obviously belonged to the nurse.

"Get him on the bed," the girl advised, and turned to a snowy-white bed that was against the wall.

Amado tried to hang back, shaking his battered head. "No, señorita," he mumbled. "The bed, it is so white and clean. I would not lie

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on such a fine bed with my blood spilling and my clothes so dirty from the mines."

"You're a gentleman, even if you have been mixed up in some sort of brawl." The nurse smiled at Juan. "But you're piling into that bed."

Before Reese knew what was happening the capable hands of the nurse seized Juan, spun him around, and lowered him to the bed as gently as if he were a child. Juan lay back with a grateful sigh and closed the battered lids of his eyes. The nurse turned, looked keenly at Jack Reese, then moved swiftly to a door across the room. She opened the door and poked her white-capped head into a spacious room beyond.

"Dr. Denton, would you step back here a moment, please?" she called.

"Of course, Miss Kane," a deep voice answered, and Reese watched the nurse come back into the room. Then a slender, gray-haired man stepped through the door, sharp gray eyes reaching to Reese, then to the bloody-faced Juan who lay quiet upon the white bed.

"What now?" Dr. Denton asked sharply as he advanced.

"He's had a mighty severe beatin' at the hands of a couple of devils who are supposed to be civilized white men, doctor." Reese spoke grimly. "His name is Juan Amado. He works in one of Osborne's mines."

"My bag from the other room, nurse," the doctor clipped. "And then cleanse these wounds. Looks like some stitching to be done. Unless some of the blows have caused brain concussion, this fellow is not in any danger."

Jack Reese crossed to the door through which he and the nurse had brought Juan Amado, lifted a heavy bar and dropped it into place. The doctor looked up at him, frowning slightly. Reese smiled coldly as he turned away from the door. Outside, voices were raised in a clamor of angry shouting.

"Don't you or the nurse unbar that door, doctor," he said. "Louis Cramer will be faunchin' to get in. But if he does get in, you'll have a corpse or two under yore feet. Fred Osborne in the next room, there?"

"Yes, Osborne is in bed in there," the medico clipped. "But what the devil—"

Reese was not waiting to discuss matters further. He stepped into the next room, saw a massive bed at the far end of it. A stubby and grizzled man was propped up in the bed, leaning against a bank of pillows. The nurse was gathering stuff from a table beside the bed, putting it hastily into a black bag.

The outlaw let his eye rove around the walls of the room. There were two doors, one leading out into the patio at his left, which he barred instantly. Then he passed on down the room, fully aware of the surprised glances of both the nurse and the man upon the bed. He barred the second door, which, he knew, would simply lead out into some other room of the mammoth house. He turned then, pulled the Stetson from his head, and stood combing thick black hair with slim fingers.

"Now, Fred Osborne, you an' me are due to have a little confab," he said flatly, and moved toward the bed.

## CHAPTER IV.

### OSBORNE'S STORY.

FRED OSBORNE'S pallid cheeks and sunken eyes showed plainly enough that he had been through much pain and fever. Yet his eyes were steady, friendly, as he looked up at Reese.

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"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked pleasantly.

"Likely you've seen my picture," the outlaw drawled. "Up north of the line, Deputy Ed Sparks is right fond of tackin' my picture on anything that ain't hard enough to bend the tacks. The name is Jack Reese, but I'm also called—"

"The Oklahoma Kid!" Osborne cried. "I remember now. Your reference to having your picture tacked up reminded me of the 'wanted' posters I've seen. Glad to know you, Reese."

To the outlaw's amazement, Fred Osborne was smiling a friendly smile and holding out a thin hand. Reese took the hand and felt firm fingers grip his briefly.

The nurse almost dropped the bag she had just lifted from the table, and her dark eyes were very round as she gazed upon the famous outlaw and gun fighter. But when Reese glanced her way she flushed, hurried toward the room where Dr. Denton waited.

A slight frown puckered Reese's brow as he turned his probing black gaze upon Osborne again. "You're glad to meet me?" he asked somewhat skeptically.

"Of course," the mining man told him heartily. "Sheriff Al Tapper, at Two Forks, and I have been friends since we were boys. He has told me about you—told me time and again that he trusts you to the limit, and swears that you are absolutely not guilty of the charges made against you by a misguided few."

"I'm proud and lucky to have a friend like Al Tapper," Reese said gravely. "But that deputy of his, Ed Sparks, is liable to cause Al trouble for bein' friendly to me."

The outlaw's slight frown had deepened to a scowl. This was not the sort of conversation he had wanted. And remembering Deputy Ed Sparks, who hated him and hunted him constantly, did not help the Oklahoma Kid's mood any.

"Whatever brought you, Reese, I'm glad," Osborne was saying. "If you're looking for work, I can—"

"About this bullet you had to have dug out of yore hip," Reese cut in quickly. "Who shot you, an' why?"

Osborne's face darkened, and a troubled look crept into his eyes. "I got going good down here about three months ago," he answered wearily. "Things went all right for a while. Then gold started disappearing as fast as we could mill it from the rock. Louis Cramer, who is in charge of operations here, kept writing to me about the shortage. Louis blames the Mexicans, but can pin nothing on them."

"You come down to look the situation over?" Reese prompted.

"I did," Osborne nodded. "And the third day I was here a bushwhacker dropped me with a rifle ball lodged in the bone of this right thigh."

"The nurse mentioned that you'd had a tough time of it," Reese explained.

"I don't know what to make of the affair," Osborne sighed. "I've mined in Mexico for over twenty years, and this is the first trouble I've ever had with Mexicans. Confound it, I can't understand this thing."

Reese's black eyes had taken on that warm sheen which meant keen interest and a quickening mind. "Yore losses have been pretty heavy?" he asked.

"Too heavy," Osborne groaned. "I'm going in the red every day. Reese, I've been robbed of at least a hundred thousand dollars, possibly more."

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Reese whistled, amazed.

"Louis Cramer is almost beside himself with worry," Osborne went on. "He has, I feel certain, done everything possible to stop the thieving. Yet it hasn't stopped."

"How long have yuh known Louis Cramer?" Reese asked bluntly.

Osborne looked sharply at the outlaw, frowned. "If you're thinking that Louis is responsible for this thieving, you're mistaken," he bit out crisply. "I've known Louis all his life. His father, Lane Cramer, was my business partner until he died eight years ago. As soon as Louis finished engineering school he came straight to me. That was five years ago. He's almost like a son to me. In fact, I had hoped to have him for a son-in-law until recently."

"What changed yore mind about it?" Reese wanted to know.

"My mind has not changed," the wounded man answered. "But my daughter, Julia, seems to have changed her mind. She and Louis had some sort of a spat just before this project got under way down here. Neither of them have said so, but I know they had a quarrel of some sort."

"If they haven't said so, how do you know they quarreled?" Reese countered.

"Because Julia refused to come down here," Cramer grumbled. "Yet she loves the rush and hurry of a new camp, the roar of a stamp mill, the creak and groan of ore wagons, the dull thunder of underground blasting. The devil himself couldn't have kept her away from here unless she and Louis had been at outs."

Jack Reese carefully catalogued that bit of information and found it instantly fitting into another, more sinister, chain of thoughts. He stood silent for some time, considering his next reach for information with real caution.

"Well, you've had considerable trouble here, that's plain," he broke the silence finally. "Looks like you'll have to take some pretty strong steps, Mr. Osborne. Have you tried beatin' the truth out of any of the Mexicans?"

"Of course not," Osborne clipped. "That's one thing I've never permitted in my camps, Reese. No rough stuff goes. Louis feels the same way about it, too. We'd fold up and quit before we'd stoop to the brutal tactics practiced in some camps."

Reese was looking down at a cigarette he was rolling, therefore the gleam of triumph which came into his eyes was masked. He lit the tobacco and blew twin streamers of smoke through the nostrils of his long and somewhat twisted nose.

"If you don't go for the rough stuff, then what will you do?" he asked quietly.

Osborne scowled, brushed a hand across his brow in a weary motion. "I sent for a man who used to be one of Pinkerton's ace detectives," he answered in a lowered voice. "This, of course, is not to be repeated, Reese. But I'm worried, for I should have heard from this man."

"He never showed up?" Reese guessed.

"Yes, he came," Osborne corrected. "But that was eight days ago. He talked it over with Louis and me, and decided to strike out into the hills, pose as a prospector searching for gold until he established himself."

Reese felt his nerves tightening, sensing what was coming. "An' this man hasn't reported back yet?" he prompted.

"No, he hasn't reported," the mining man was answering. "And, if

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you'd do it, Reese, I'd like to have you scout around the hills, see if you can locate him. You've visited this place many times before, I understand, so your riding about the hills would create no suspicion."

"Maybe I could find yore man, at that," Reese decided. "That is, if I knew his name and what he looked like."

"The man I want you to find is about your height, but much stockier," Osborne explained. "He has gray hair, light-blue eyes, and has a gold crown on one of his upper front teeth. He looks—and is—as hard as chilled steel. His name is Charlie Doyle."

## CHAPTER V.

### AN ULTIMATUM.

DR. DENTON and Nora Kane, the nurse, were just finishing their work of bandaging Juan Amado's head and face when Jack Reese walked into the room. Juan's black eyes peered out through a narrow opening between strips of white cloth, and his head was completely covered with gauze strips.

"I could take first prize at a sewing bee after the stitching I had to do on this lad," the doctor grunted, looking up.

He finished fastening a bandage, then straightened, his cool eyes studying the outlaw keenly. "Miss Kane, the nurse, here, tells me that you're Jack Reese, the Oklahoma Kid," he said quietly. "That correct?"

"Correct," Reese admitted.

He glanced at the nurse and saw her watching him with that round-eyed expression of awe. He moved to the bed, looked down at Juan Amado. "Feel better?" he asked.

"Much better," the Mexican answered. "You and the doctor and the nurse have been very kind, Señor Reese."

"With only a little opening in the bandages left to talk through, an' another narrow slit to see through, Juan, you look like a Hallowe'en ghost goin' some place to scare a bunch of kids," Reese told the patient. "You tell the doctor or the nurse what happened to you?"

"They did not ask, señor," Juan gulped. "But what will I do now? If those hombres find me an' beat me some more—"

"Don't worry," Reese cut in. "That pair won't get at you again. I'll see to that. An' don't tell anyone who beat you up or why. Regardless of who asks questions, do not answer those things. Understand?"

"No, I do not understand," Juan muttered. "But I do as you say. I answer no questions."

"Obviously, Mr. Reese, you do not trust the doctor and me," the nurse observed somewhat sharply.

Reese turned, looked steadily at the girl and the doctor. They were both plainly displeased with what he had been saying.

"No one, not even Fred Osborne, is to know that this man, Juan Amado, is here," he told them. "You have some room where he could be put an' kept out of sight until I get certain matters cleared up?"

"Nora Kane and I will not be parties to anything underhanded, Reese," Dr. Denton snapped.

"There's nothin' underhanded in what I'm askin'," he assured them gravely. "I want Juan Amado kept out of sight an' his whereabouts a secret in order to save his life. I asked Juan to tell you two nothing about what happened to him because if you knew that it would endanger yore own lives. Just keep

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Amado hidden, an' don't ask him questions. I'll let you know when it's safe to turn him loose."

Before either the amazed doctor or the equally dumfounded nurse could answer, Reese crossed to the door, slid the bar back, and jerked the portal open. Poke Arnett stood there at a ridiculous stooping pose, his shaggy yellow head hatless, his suddenly bulging eyes level with where the keyhole would have been when the door was closed.

Reese put the palm of his left hand on Arnett's forehead and shoved violently before the hulking fellow could straighten up. Arnett scooted backward across the tile walk, to land sitting in the new green lawn. He dropped the hat he had held in one hand, but managed to hang onto his rifle.

"Now here you are, Poke, follow-in' me around, still tryin' to pick a fight," Reese drawled. "Doggone, but you're a troublesome sort. What makes you so ornery?"

Arnett's face was almost purple as he crawled to his feet, looking sheepishly right and left. But Reese was not watching the big rascal. His hard black eyes were fastened on Louis Cramer, who stood beside the gurgling fountain, trying vainly to look only surprised at seeing Arnett so neatly exposed as an eavesdropper.

Reese had stepped quickly outside the moment he shoved Arnett, and closed the door solidly behind him. He stood now, the dead stub of his cigarette dangling from thin lower lip, his thumbs hooked carelessly in the crossed shell belts about his middle. His bleak eyes swept the patio, ran along the row of leafy young oleander bushes at the far side. He saw the toe of a boot at one point, the faint outline of a man's head and shoulders at another. Tom Brail and Buck Nally, the outlaw guessed shrewdly. And they would be watching him over drawn guns.

Reese lifted one hand slowly, twitched a lean forefinger at Louis Cramer beckoningly. Cramer stiffened, face crimsoning angrily. He glanced toward the row of oleanders, then looked back at Reese.

"Come on over an' be sociable, Louie," Reese drawled. "An' tell Brail an' Nally to crawl out of the flower bed."

Cramer cursed thinly, came stamping across the lawn and walked in angry strides. The oleander bushes shuddered at two separate points, then Tom Brail and Buck Nally were slinking out into view, their expressions both sheepish and worried.

"You two," Reese told them flatly, "get to hell out of here. Go stand in the gate, where I can keep an eye on you."

"Where's Juan Amado, Reese?" Louis Cramer demanded angrily. "You had no business taking that murderer out of the room where I had locked him. What have you done with him?"

Reese did not look at Cramer for a moment. He watched Tom Brail and Buck Nally saunter over to the big gateway and stand there, glowering sullenly back at him. When he saw that they intended to content themselves with nothing more than glaring, he turned his attention on Cramer, who was pale with poorly suppressed anger.

"I put Amado where he'd be a little more comfortable," he told Cramer. "But let this trouble-huntin' Arnett, here, tell you what he heard. You sent him to snoop, an' I reckon he heard what was bein' said. Speak up, Poke. What did you see through the keyhole, an' what did you hear?"

Arnett shifted his weight from one

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big foot to the other and looked uncomfortable. He rolled his eyes at Cramer, who cursed him angrily.

"Why get sore at me?" Arnett demanded. "I told you, Mr. Cramer, that Reese would ketch me if I went snoopin'. I—"

"Cut that chatter an' tell Louie what you heard," Reese interrupted.

"My name is Louis, not Louie," Cramer snapped testily.

The fellow was obviously uneasy over Amado being taken from the room. And he was just as obviously killing mad. But he was holding both his uneasiness and his anger in check to a fair extent, and Reese realized that he was brainy enough to be hard to trap into making any sort of foolish play.

"Amado is in the gal's room, Mr. Cramer, for I heard him talkin' in there," Arnett was blurting. "I heard that sawbones and the nurse talkin', too. An' the Kid, here, was doin' some jabberin' of his own."

"You heard what I said?" Reese prompted.

"I heard you tell Juan Amado not to name the gents who beat him up or tell why he was beat up," Arnett confessed. "You also told the doctor an' the nurse that Fred Osborne was not to know that Juan Amado was in the house, or that he had been beat up or anything."

Reese was watching Louis Cramer's face. He saw the blue eyes widen, watched an expression of mingling relief and wariness come over Cramer's face.

"You told Amado to keep his mouth shut?" Cramer demanded, and his eyes locked with the black eyes of the outlaw.

A hard grin quirked Reese's thin mouth, and he let his eyes take on a shrewd something as he said: "Sure, I told Amado to keep his mouth shut."

"Why?" Cramer was instantly suspicious.

Reese's grin became mocking, his eyes more cunning. "The answer to that is for yore ears alone, Cramer. All you've got to do is send Arnett away from here, then pass the gravy."

"Pass the gravy?" Cramer snapped, coloring. "What sort of damned foolishness are you talking?"

"Nobody ever knows what that critter is sayin' for certain," Arnett grumbled sourly. "To tell a gent to pass the gravy is owl-hooter lingo, Mr. Cramer, meanin' to hand over a divvy of stolen money."

Reese cursed inwardly. Louis Cramer's face drained of color, and his slim right hand flipped up toward the left lapel of his coat, hung trembling there while something desperate burned in his widening eyes. Reese saw the bulge of a gun under Cramer's coat, and knew that the fellow was dangerously near being scared into jerking the weapon. But nothing of his inner thoughts showed on his brown face or in his eyes as he turned on Poke Arnett.

"Now there you go, old trouble hunter," he said in an aggravated tone. "Poke, you're not satisfied with followin' me around, tryin' to make me fight. You have to go call yore boss a crook an' accuse him of havin' stolen money hoarded up some place."

"But I didn't say it about him!" Arnett howled uneasily. "Quit twistin' what I say around an' makin' it sound like somethin' it ain't. I never said nobody had any—Aw!"

"He's liftin' his gun, Cramer!" Reese cried. "Watch him close. Poke aims to shoot one of us, looks like."

In his embarrassment and excite-

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ment, Arnett had raised the rifle he still clutched, shaking it angrily at his tormentor. He swore hotly now, slammed the rifle down upon the lawn, and pressed both big hands to his shaggy head.

"You'd drive a feller crazy inside of a hour, Kid," he croaked. "Dammit, I ain't makin' no trouble, an' you know it. What you want is to find a excuse for shootin' me."

"Pick up your rifle and get out to the gate with Tom and Buck," Cramer ordered Arnett.

The hulking towhead picked up his rifle, glowered sullenly at Reese, then shambled away, muttering darkly.

When he was out of earshot Cramer stepped closer to Reese, his shrewd eyes troubled, questioning. Reese was still grinning faintly, and his eyes still held that look of mockery and cunning.

"Now suppose you explain all this nonsense about moving Amado, then telling him to keep his mouth shut," Cramer snapped.

He did a good job of sounding only annoyed over the affair. His expression, too, was one of peevishness rather than great concern. But deep in those probing blue eyes lay a gleam of desperation.

"You need me in yore business, Cramer," Reese stated coldly. "An' you'll pass the gravy plenty, hombre."

Cramer stiffened, his face reddening. "What the devil do you mean?" he demanded.

Reese laughed, and the sound was coldly mocking, mirthless. "Hell, man, you're bunglin' yore job," he said grimly. "You've left a trail a mile wide—a trail any man could follow. You've got over a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold cached and a hand-picked bunch of tough gunmen to help you get it across the line when the time comes. But you've mixed murder into yore thievery, an' there's a noose danglin' above yore head."

Cramer was white to the lips, and his eyes were dark pools in a face that had become as stiff as stone. His hand flipped up, long fingers trembling against the left lapel of his coat.

"Don't try it," Reese purred. "I'd shoot you before you got that gun halfway out of the shoulder holster you carry it in. You're not stacked up against some poor, trustin' Mexican now."

Cramer lowered his hand, and was trembling noticeably. "Damn you, what nonsense is this?" he panted. "Callin' me a thief! You must be drunk or full of hop—or both. What else could have given you such a wild imagination?"

"I told you that you're leavin' a trail a mile wide behind you."

Cramer managed to snort disgustedly. "Suppose you tell me something about this trail I'm leaving behind me. I'd like to see just how wild your imagination is."

"Want me to start at the beginnin'?"

"Start at the beginning," Cramer retorted.

Reese nodded, took the cigarette stub from his lips and flipped it away. "All right, I'll start at the beginnin'," he agreed. "That was when you practically had the Osborne fortune in yore pockets, Cramer. By that I mean that you were engaged to Julia Osborne, old John's only heir."

Cramer's eyes widened, and he dragged a shaky hand across his bruised chin. "Keep her out of this!" he demanded.

"But she fits in," Reese insisted. "As long as you saw a chance to marry her, you were settin' pretty.

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But you couldn't quite behave yoreself. The girl got wise to some of yore ways. She gave you the gate, an' you know Julia well enough to know that you're out of the runnin' where she's concerned."

Sweat was beading Cramer's face, and his long legs were shuddering under his weight. Yet he managed to glare as he met his accuser's hard eyes.

"Julia gave you yore walkin' papers just about the time this project was gettin' under way down here," Reese went on coldly. "Osborne sent you here, put you in full charge. An' you saw a way to get yore hands on a fortune, even if the girl had turned you down. You started stealin' gold bars, an' makin' all sorts of trouble for the Mexicans by accusin' them of the stealin'."

"You're crazy," Cramer croaked. "I'll not listen to any more of your talk."

He made no effort to move away, however, and Reese went on: "Then Osborne came down, an' you made your first bad slip by tryin' to get him out of the way. Osborne would never suspect you, so he let you in on the fact that he sent for Charlie Doyle, the man hunter from the States. But you couldn't have a bloodhound like Doyle nosin' around, so you sent Vic Silvert out to murder him."

Louis Cramer came up on his toes, stark terror in his eyes for a moment. Then he caught himself, regained some measure of control. "You talk like a lunatic, Reese," he choked.

He looked wildly about, as if fearing someone might have overheard.

"You're the lunatic," Reese snorted. "Vic Silvert bungled that job this mornin', Cramer. Oh, he killed Doyle, sure. Then Silvert drove the pick into Doyle's back an' left Juan Amado's hat lyin' handy."

"Who . . . who told you anything like this?" Cramer gulped.

"No one told me," Reese replied flatly. "I was there. Have you spread that tale about Silvert claimin' to be any eyewitness to Juan Amado's murdering Charlie Doyle?"

"I . . . I've said nothing about it yet," Cramer panted. "That is, I haven't made it exactly public. But when Vic Silvert shows up we'll spread the story, and Amado will hang."

"Forget about Vic Silvert showin' up," Reese snorted. "He won't. The fool sort of objected to my presence out there this mornin'. I killed him."

"You killed Vic?" Cramer stammered.

"I did," Reese growled. "I also took that pick out of Doyle's back an' lugged the pick an' Amado's hat off into the hills an' hid 'em."

"I know nothing about the affair, of course," Cramer said shakily. "But you had no business doing a thing like that. You meddlesome devil, I'll see that you pay for this."

"You fool, I told you Silvert bungled," Reese snapped. "There's a bullet lodged just under the skin on Doyle's breast. The minute an undertaker gets hold of the body, that bullet will be found. Then where would you an' yore pet gun slammers be if you'd sprung this frame-up on Amado?"

Cramer looked sick enough to die in his tracks.

"I told you that you need me in yore business, an' you do," Reese droned.

He hesitated, knowing that what he said next was, perhaps, signing his own death warrant. But he thought of Juan and Pablo Amado, and other innocent men who had

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suffered at the hands of this scheming devil.

"So far, Cramer, I'm the only living man who suspects you," he said slowly. "So pass the gravy, fella. You an' yore pals cut me in on this deal, or I'll do some talkin'. I'll give you until midnight, Cramer. I'll see you, an' come to you for yore answer. If you agree to cut me in on the deal you'll have to show me the cached gold to prove you're not stallin'."

## CHAPTER VI.

### JUDGE COLT DECIDES.

IT was five minutes before twelve, midnight, when Jack Reese walked into the thronged street of Picacho. He had spent the afternoon and this much of the night at a canyon out in the hills, where he had cooked food for himself and where there had been grass and water for his horse.

Throughout the afternoon the outlaw had carefully gone over his dangerous plan, trying to be prepared for the trouble he knew was bound to come. That Cramer would set a gun trap for him he did not doubt. Reminding Cramer that he was the only one who even so much as suspected him of the gold theft had been enough to assure a trap being set. And telling Cramer that the gold would have to be shown as a matter of good faith was, Reese knew, naming the place for the trap.

The gold would naturally be taken off into the hills some place, well away from the mining district, before it was hidden. And Reese felt certain that Cramer would lead him to the cache, and that Buck Nally, Tom Brail and probably others of their stripe would be hidden at that cache, ready to blast the life from him with guns. The odds would be against him, and those gunmen would do their shooting from ambush, he felt certain. Yet he had the advantage of realizing that he faced such danger, or at least he would go to that cache in case Cramer agreed to his proposition fully expecting an ambush.

That Cramer would agree Reese felt certain. The fellow was guilty of thievery and worse, and his only hope of escaping punishment lay in sealing the lips of the man who had found him out.

Reese was considering those things now as he bored into the rushing crowd of laughing, shouting men along the dusty walk. Keen eyes raking the shadowy forms about him, he pressed on and on, ever alert, never hurrying.

He saw Cramer as the man stopped in a flood of yellow lamplight which poured through a hardware-store window. Cramer was scanning the faces of those who surged around and past him, and his manner was that of a highly nervous person.

Reese stopped in a pool of black shadow, watching Cramer closely. He waited until the mining man moved on toward him into the shadows, then called Cramer's name. He could see the fellow stiffen, saw him buffeted roughly aside by the brawny shoulders of excited miners who were surging down the walk. Then Cramer bored through the throng to halt before Reese, who stood with his back to a solid adobe wall, and with his hands resting on gun butts.

"It's four or five minutes yet until midnight, I reckon," Reese drawled. "But if you've got yore answer ready, I'd as soon hear it now."

"Let's get to a quieter place," Cramer snapped. "This racket is enough to tear the nerves out of a man."

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"Out back of the buildin's ought to be quiet enough," Reese suggested. "We can walk down between these two buildin's behind us. You can have the honor of goin' first."

"Don't trust me, eh?" Cramer spat.

"I don't trust you or any man like you."

Cramer cursed at the blunt rebuff, but stepped between the two buildings and walked briskly along the dark passage. A moment later he and Reese were out in a moonlit opening behind the buildings, the din of the street somewhat subdued yet far from lost.

Reese pulled a big silver watch from his pocket, tilted it so that the white light of a full moon struck the dial. "Less than a minute until midnight," he informed, pocketing the timepiece.

"To the devil with all this nonsense," Cramer spluttered. "Reese, suppose I tell you that I know absolutely nothing of that missing gold?"

"If you told me that, I'd know you lied, Cramer. I told you that you've been leavin' a trail a mile wide behind you. If I talked, an' you went to trial down here for the death of some of the Mexicans who have been mysteriously killed around the hills, you'd be stood up against an adobe wall and shot."

Cramer cursed under his breath, brushed a hand across his lips and chin in a jerky motion.

"I want a cut in on your loot," Reese went on. "Do you take me in an' show me the cache, or do you take a chance on standin' against an adobe wall?"

"I think you're bluffing, Reese. I admit nothing, understand. But suppose I did have a lot of gold cached some place and told you to go to hell. You want money too badly to do any talking. You'd keep on hounding and threatening me, just as you've done today. Didn't give me credit for having sense enough to figure out that angle, did you?"

Cramer laughed as he finished speaking, and there had been something almost jaunty in his voice.

"Yes, I reckoned you might look at it that way," Reese admitted dryly. "But I thought you'd have sense enough to see that I could still make plenty of money by turnin' yore apple cart over. Old Fred Osborne would pay a right nice little sum to the man who recovered that gold. Tom Brail an' the rest of your bunch would give up plenty of head before they'd be stood against an adobe wall. They'd tell about the gold cache an' talk you into a session with a firin' squad to save their own necks. Had *you* thought of *that?*"

Cramer evidently had not thought of those things. He swore hotly, and again ran his hand over mouth and chin in that jerky motion.

"Damn you!" he growled. "Reese, I've got to play the thing your way. But you're badly mistaken on one point. Tom Brail and those other lunk-headed gunmen I hire know nothing of my gold cache. Vic Silvert was the only man besides myself who knew the facts. And you killed Silvert, as you claimed to have done, for his and Charlie Doyle's bodies were found this afternoon, just as you said they could be found."

"You tryin' to kid somebody?" Reese snapped. "About not havin' Brail an' Nally, at least, in on yore gold secret?"

"I've got sense enough, Reese, to know that men like Tom Brail and Buck Nally would double-cross me. If they knew I had that gold cached

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they'd murder me and make off with the stuff at the first opportunity. You may do the same thing, for I trust you no more than I trust the others. But if you talked, I'd be in hot water, for these infernal gre—er—Mexicans hate me and would jump at a chance to pin something on me."

Reese was scowling, trying desperately to pierce the swath of shadow beneath the brim of Cramer's hat. That strip of shadow hid the man's eyes, and Reese cursed inwardly.

It seemed incredible that Louis Cramer would tackle a job of wholesale thievery with only one man to help. But on the other hand, Cramer's statement that he could not trust men like Tom Brail and Buck Nally made horse sense. Reese knew that he could have told instantly whether the man was lying or not if he could see his eyes. Yet he could not see those hard blue eyes, and had to content himself with judging only Cramer's spoken words.

"So you're takin' me in on the deal," he mused flatly. "So far, so good. But how about showin' me the gold you've got cached?"

"I'd rather not," Cramer hedged. "It's dangerous to go to that cache. Why run the risk?"

"Either lead me to that cache—or else," Reese grunted.

Cramer squirmed for a moment, then threw up his hands in a motion of resignation. "All right, come on," he growled. "It's dangerous, going to the cache on a night as light as this. But you're too stubborn to listen to reason, so get your horse and meet me at the upper end of the street in five minutes."

"You got a horse?" Reese asked.

"Certainly," Cramer snapped testily. "I left it at the upper end of the street."

"Then we'll both walk up there, get your horse, an' walk back to where I left mine. An' Lord pity you, Cramer, if you've got a trap set for me at the yonder end of the street.

Cramer made an unpleasant sound in his throat, then led the way behind the buildings at a rapid walk. They came to a vacant plot of ground and found his horse waiting there as he claimed. There was no trap of any sort, and Reese relaxed as they went back along the route they had followed.

Ten minutes later the two of them were mounted, riding stirrup to stirrup along a well-marked trail which led to the north. But a mile beyond the town, Cramer swung west into a twisting canyon, and Reese dropped back as they cut into pools of deep shadow cast by tall bluffs.

"Stop acting like a bullet-singed coyote," Cramer broke the long silence. "I've got no trick up my sleeve, Reese. With your reputation for gun speed, I shouldn't think you'd be afraid of a fellow like me."

"I'm afraid of what a fella like yoreself might have waitin' along these dark places to happen to me," Reese drawled.

They followed the canyon for an hour, neither of them speaking again. Then Cramer halted at the base of a sheer bluff, swung down out of the saddle and trailed his mount's reins.

"We're here," he informed glumly. "See that shelf trail? It leads up to a narrow crevice which runs back into the bluff. The crevice is just around that bulge you can see there where the scrub cedar stands. We have to go up the trail on foot."

Reese felt his pulse quicken as his sharp eye followed the steeply slanted shelf. Cramer's sullen atti-

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tude, and his air of a man being forced into a bargain he did not relish, had brought Reese to the conclusion that Cramer was up to no trickery. Yet that belief waned now, for this narrow shelf up which Cramer said they must climb on foot offered countless opportunities for an ambush.

Silently Reese swung out of the saddle, dropped his bay's reins. He let his hands fall to gun butts, lifted the weapons slightly to assure himself that they were ready for swift withdrawal from the scabbards.

"Yuh take the lead, Cramer," he said stonily. "I'll be less than an arm's length behind you every inch of the way. If some gent was hunkered up yonder in any of the hundred or so crevices along that trail with a rifle, he'd have to kill you first to get a shot at me."

"Too bad you can't slip into one of my pockets and be carried up," Cramer sneered. "You're the most suspicious devil I ever saw. Walk as close to me as you like, but don't trip me. If a man fell off that trail he'd have to be picked up with a blotter."

Reese felt his suspicions subside somewhat, for Cramer started up the trail without the least hesitancy, toiling along head down, shoulders bent against the strain of leg and back muscles. They forged up and up, and Reese felt the short hairs along the back of his neck prickle each time he glanced off into the canyon at his left. The trail they followed was seldom three feet wide, and in many places less than two. And the wall at the left fell away sheer and barren, the boulder-studded canyon stretching awesomely at its base.

Reese was glad when they turned past the rounded bulge where the lone cedar had found root hold in a dirt-filled seam. He saw a narrow slot staring blackly at him from the moon-bathed cliff and tensed as Louis Cramer stopped before it, to stand panting heavily and mopping sweat from his face.

"I'm a fool for letting you in on this," Cramer growled. "I've taken all the risks, done all the work. Now you come along and blackmail me for a share of the spoils."

"Shove on, fella," Reese droned. "I want to see this gold. Then we'll talk about pay-off."

He sleeved his face free of sweat in a quick motion, then followed Cramer, who had turned into the slot after a sharp, searching look at him. A match spluttered as Cramer dragged it against a stone wall, then Reese saw Cramer lifting a lantern, heard the globe brackets squeal protestingly. When the globe lowered, mellow light flooded the tall but narrow crevice which twisted sharply away to the right. Cramer strode confidentially along the slot, his distorted shadow leaping and plunging over the stone wall at his left. Then they came into a slightly wider portion of the crevice, and Reese saw something that made his eyes fairly bulge.

Piled carelessly upon a square of tarp was a mound of fat little golden bars, their faces glowing redly as the lantern light played over them. Louis Cramer lifted the lantern up to a stick that had been wedged into a crack in the wall and stood looking down greedily at the gleaming fortune at his feet.

"Well, here it is," he said throatily. "A hundred and forty thousand dollars' worth of gold. Reese, I'll give you a dozen of those bars right now if you'll promise to ride back north of the line and let me alone."

"And we'll give you a hot-lead ticket to boothill if you bat an eye! Kid, we've got no scrap with you.

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Fact is, we want you with us when we divvy up that purty yaller stuff."

The harsh voice boomed in the cavern, jarring every nerve in Jack Reese. He sprang sidewise and back at the first tones of the voice, and his ivory-butted guns were unsheathed in and amazingly deft motion of his hands.

"Kid, hold on!" another voice croaked. "This is Buck Nally. Tom Brail is here with me. We ain't huntin' no powder argument with you, hombre. Like Tom said, you're even Stephen with us on this haul."

"That's right, Kid," Tom Brail spoke up. "Buck an' me ain't got no quarrel with you. It's that two-faced dude there in front of you that we'll send to hell on greased skids if he don't watch out."

Reese came out of his crouch, more amazed than he ever had been in his life. He turned his glance on Louis Cramer, and was struck instantly by the fact that Cramer was showing much more spunk than he had suspected the fellow of possessing. Cramer stood stiff-backed and cursing, his eyes boring into the shadows from which the voices had come.

"You two come out of there!" he ordered sharply. "What the devil do you think you're up to?"

"Still the bull o' the woods, are you?" Tom Brail taunted as he sauntered into view.

Brail had a gun in each bony hand, and his green eyes raked Cramer up and down. Buck Nally slithered out on Brail's right flank, and Nally's pale eyes also ran up and down Cramer in a contemptuous glance.

"Kid, scrooch up to that swell-headed thing an' jerk the .44 out of that shoulder harness under his left lapel," Brail called. "And curry the dude for another hide-out, too. You never can tell about one of these swelled-up things like Cramer, here. He might have more stingers than you'd guess."

Reese hesitated, some inborn sense of caution warning him that this thing was not on the level.

"What does this mean, Brail?" Louis Cramer asked sharply. "How did you and Nally find your way to this cache?"

"Thought you was slick, didn't you?" Nally sneered. "Hell, Cramer, Vic Silvert was like a blood brother to Tom an' me. He told us about this deal from the first. Vic an' Tom an' me aimed to lift this booty an' quit Mexico like our tails was on fire when the sign was right."

"But Vic, he got hisself killed this mornin'," Brail said grimly. "So Tom an' me was set to clean out your cache. We don't know how you happened to fetch the Oklahoma Kid up here, but we're glad you did. He's a good man to have along in case anybody tried to stop us crossin' the line with this bullion."

"Pull his fangs, Kid," Tom Brail grinned coldly. "Then Buck an' me can holster these guns."

Reese slid his hand under Cramer's coat lapel, pulled out a stubby .44 Colt from a shoulder holster. His questing hands found no other weapons, and he stepped out into the open, the captured .44 dangling in his right hand.

"All right, Cramer, waltz down here to us," Brail snapped. "Lay down on your face while Buck ties you with that wire yonder, an' you'll come to no further grief."

"You'll sweat for this," Cramer growled, and started forward.

Reese saw it then—saw that he had been tricked. The first thing that warned him was Cramer's hurrying forward toward the two gun-

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men. And almost at the instant Reese saw that, Cramer glanced back at him, and there was triumph in his flashing eyes. Then Cramer was folding at the knees, pitching forward.

"Get him!" he howled.

Only superb co-ordination of mind and muscle saved the life of Jack Reese. He was already springing when Cramer yelled, and the two of them struck the stone floor of the narrow cavern in a heap, Reese slightly on top.

"Roll clear, boss!" Tom Brail yelled wildly. "Roll away from him!"

Cramer was snarling in mingling rage and terror, kicking and clawing at Reese, trying to get clear. A gun threw thunderous echoes along the cavern, and Reese felt his left shoulder jar, go numb and lifeless. And Cramer flattened out, moaning.

Reese flipped up the stubby gun he had taken from Cramer, flung a shot at the broad chest of Buck Nally. The .44 was light of frame, and poorly balanced. The slug struck Buck Nally in the throat instead of the chest, and the burly hellion spilled backward, a ghastly sound running from his gaping mouth as his head flopped queerly to one side.

Reese threw the stubby gun full into Tom Brail's face as the lank gunman rushed in, trying to shoot from an angle that would not endanger Louis Cramer. Brail loosed a pair of slugs that fanned above Reese's head, howling profanity as the gun ripped his cheek, almost upsetting him.

He thumbed two shots from the gun he had drawn so rapidly they sounded like twin six-guns being fired almost in unison. Tom Brail shuddered, spilled cocked guns from his bony hands, and pitched slowly forward, a thin moan of sound haunting the last breath that would ever gush from his lungs.

Reese stood on wide-planted boots, sick and dizzy from the pain of his bullet-torn shoulder. The bone was not broken, for he could move the arm. Yet it was throbbing badly, causing his eyes to blur and his head to spin.

"All right, Cramer," he growled. "On yore feet, hombre. We're goin' back—"

His voice trailed off. He stared, took a step forward and looked more closely. Louis Cramer lay face down on the stone flooring of the cavern, a broadening pool of blood beneath his head. Reese saw the gaping wound in Cramer's skull then, and remembered suddenly how Cramer had gone limp when Buck Nally had fired that first shot. Nally's slug had torn through the top of Reese's shoulder, struck the stone floor, and glanced upward into Louis Cramer's brain.

Reese holstered his gun, began making a sling of his neckerchief to rest that numbed left arm. But his eyes, brooding and bitter, clung to Cramer's dead body.

"You got what you had comin', at that," he said grimly. "Now I'll have to go tell Fred Osborne where to find his missin' gold an' the buzzards who took it. Then I'm raisin' a dust for good old United States soil, even if Ed Sparks an' his buckshot gun are waitin' up there for me."

**Did you like it? If you did, there are more exciting gun-swift stories of the Oklahoma Kid coming soon. We think the Kid is as good a bad man as there is, and that the adventures he meets are tops in interest and suspense! So watch out for another yarn about him in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.**



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# BLOOD ON THE BARBED WIRE

***The ripping prongs of that closing wire noose angered the range men until they proved a barricade against disaster!***

## By Mojave Lloyd

BIG CLEM RALSTON was letting a waggle-tailed puppy lick blood from his fingers when he dimly discerned his father striding angrily toward him.

Old Rocky Ralston, tall, lean, hawk-visaged, came stomping up on the porch of his son's hardware store in Piedras with the devil in his boot heels. Clem shoved the last roll of

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barbed wire up on the pile he had been stacking and wiped his sore hands on a piece of burlap. Straightening his six-foot-two of rawboned bulk, he peered through his thick-lensed spectacles at the stormy face of the towering old rawhider.

"Barbed wire is hard to handle," he said.

"That's exactly what I'm here for," thundered his grizzled old dad. "You—a Ralston—handling barbed wire! You—you—" The furious old boss of the Winged R shook a massive fist before his son's near-sighted eyes. "You ain't no son of mine!"

Clem Ralston had expected this. But he hadn't seen any way to avoid it. Raised on the vast reaches of the old Winged R, Clem belonged running cattle. But his eyesight was so bad he could scarcely see past a horse's ears, even through eyeglasses beveled like a pair of soup plates. He could no more work cattle than he could make a patchwork quilt. So old Rocky had willed the Winged R to his younger son, Lee, and set Clem up with a hardware store.

"You have et something, pa," Clem said in his quiet way, "don't set well on your stomick."

"You blinking young whelp!" roared the old man. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. You—a Ralston—furnishing the barbed wire for a parcel of psalm-singing plow chasers to fence off our bottom lands and starve our cows. You reckon I aim to stand idle and see flesh and blood of mine dirty his hands in such devilment?"

Clem was uncomfortably aware that a crowd was gathering. In the front rank he could dimly make out the high-cheekboned face of Bert Brody, wearing a satisfied smirk. That made him think of Connie Northrup, bringing a warm flush to his homely face.

"Now listen here, pa," he said evenly. "You know full well the day of open range in the Piedras country is gone. The Piedras is settling up. Those bottoms the hoemen is squatting in is public land. Soon as the surveys is run, they can file homestead claims." A faraway look appeared in his kindly gray eyes. "And where you and the rest of the cowmen would raise three-four steers, them nesters is raising a dozen kids."

"Kids to grow up into more fool hoemen!" thundered old Rocky disgustedly. "And where do us cowmen get off?"

"You can range farther up on the skirts of the Magpies," Clem argued. "There's more land there than all the cowmen in the Piedras can ever use."

Old Rocky held his temper with an effort. He spoke slowly:

"And hire double the crew to handle our stock?"

"And still make money aplenty," Clem added.

A thick voice cut in: "I can't get my B Bar B stuff anywhere near the Magpies."

Old Rocky spun and looked Bert Brody up and down, from fancy Justins and fringed chaps to jutting cheekbones and high-peaked Stetson.

"Who the hell asked you to chip in your two bits?" he barked. He whirled again to face his son.

"You sell one more roll of that infernal stuff," he threatened, aiming a quivering forefinger at the stack of barbed wire, "and damned if I . . . if I—"

"Keep your shirt tail in, pa," interrupted Clem quietly. "What if I don't handle the stuff? Somebody else will."

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"Not by a damn sight!" contradicted a lanky cowman harshly. "If he does, we'll burn him to the ground."

Clem could hear mutters of agreement in the close-packed crowd. His fondest hopes were tumbling around his ears. Most of his life it had seemed he was condemned never to get anywhere. Then his dad had set him up with a store. By sweat and square dealing he was building a good business. But if he refused to handle barbed wire for the incoming settlers, over half his business would vanish overnight. Another thought goaded him.

When he thought of Connie Northrup, that warm flush stained his sweaty face again. He was only waiting till he had his hardware business well established to tell Connie how he felt, although his heart told him the starry-eyed girl knew it anyhow. Delay was dangerous. When he thought of the possibility that Connie might fall for the smooth line of talk Bert Brody was steadily feeding her, icy fingers crept up and down Clem's long spine.

As if reading his son's mind, old Rocky made the mistake of probing at the sore spot. "You ain't thinking, by ary chance," he growled, "how Gil Northrup, leader of the damned hoemen, is father to a brown-maned filly?"

Clem's rugged face darkened. His vague eyes, behind the thick glasses, showed lights like sparks. His good-humored mouth drew into a taut line.

"You leave womenfolk out of this," he said flatly. "I'll ride out to the spread this evening. You'll be cooled out by then maybe, so we can talk. You'd best hit leather."

Choking with fury, old Rocky backhanded his son flush across the mouth. Clem reeled backward, tripped over a plank and crashed into the pile of barbed wire. A roll skidded down over his face, gashing it as if he'd been clawed by a grizzly, and sending his glasses flying.

He freed himself from the wire and picked up his glasses. One lens was cracked, but he smeared some of the blood from his face with the back of his hand and put the spectacles back on. His great hands were shaking. His voice had a choked sound.

"That's the first time, pa," he said gently, "ever you laid a hand on me."

"It won't be the last," roared the furious oldster. "As if I didn't have aplenty to worry me—what with border herds reported trailing up this way rotten with Texas fever!"

With blood dribbling from his square jaw, Clem turned toward the doorway. "I will ride out this evening," he repeated.

"You do," blustered old Rocky, "and Lee will most likely work you over with a bull whip."

Clem watched the irate old man stomp down the steps, then went into his store and heeled the door.

He was crossing Chuckwalla Wash that evening, near the west line of the Winged R, when a bullet snarled past his ear. A second one cut a bridle rein. The big roan grulla he was riding unwound like a bobcat stung by a scorpion.

The next Clem knew, he was sitting beside a boulder with his tousled head in his hands. Hat and glasses were gone. In the ghostly light of the rising moon he found the sombrero, but not the spectacles. There was a throbbing lump above his right ear that felt as big as a squash.

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He found his grulla feeding in a patch of buck brush, got hold of him and knotted a saddle string to the broken rein. He knew he hadn't a chance of finding any trace of the dry-gulcher—not with his eyesight. Hauling himself into the saddle, he racked on toward home.

*Home,* he thought bitterly. The old Winged R wouldn't seem much like home any more. The soft-spoken little woman who had been his mother had died of typhoid when he was ten years old and Lee was eight. And now old Rocky had slapped him across the mouth.

The instant he sighted the rambling buildings of the old home outfit he knew something was wrong. Every window in the big dobe was blazing with light. And when he rode into the yard he saw the doctor's blaze-faced bay at the hitch rail. He tossed the roan's reins into the dust and strode inside feeling as though his heart were being squeezed.

The only person in the huge kitchen was High Low, the ancient Chinese cook. He popped up from his chair by the stove, shuffled across the room and stuck out a hand like a bird's claw. The yellowed parchment of his face crinkled in what was meant for a smile.

"Big boy come along splead," he cackled. "Velly good!" Then all joy vanished from his shriveled countenance. "Hell come along, too," he added dolefully, bobbing his bald head. "Can happen!"

Clem could hear the muttering of muffled voices in the living room. "*Que es?*" he asked softly.

Before the Chinaman could answer, old Rocky and Dr. Smallwood stepped from the living room. At sight of Clem the old rawhider stopped short. His voice rasped:

"You!" he spat. "You would show up!" He lifted an arm like a corral post and pointed at the door. "Haul your dirty carcass out of here!"

Clem swung to face the little doctor who had helped him into the world. "You don't look like you have et locoweed, doctor," he said. "What the hell has went haywire around here?"

Dr. Smallwood's twinkling blue eyes went serious. "Lee is cut to ribbons," he said. "He lost a lot of blood before they found him. If he pulls through it will be a close shave."

"How?" began Clem. But the thunder of old Rocky's voice drowned him out.

"You squint-eyed whelp!" roared the old-timer. "If Lee dies, it will be *you* murdered him!"

The little doctor winked at Clem. "You and me can trail along back to town together, son. I'm getting too old to ride the night trails alone—might fall asleep and pitch off my apron-face."

Old Rocky glared at his son. "Get gone," he rasped, "and stay gone!"

"I almost did," Clem said slowly. "What skunk did you tell off to bushwhack me in Chuckwalla Wash? Would it be Mocho Perkins?"

Old Rocky Ralston's hawkish face turned purple. He tried to speak, but words wouldn't come. With his grim mouth working soundlessly, he pointed at the door.

Clem threw a last glance around the bright old kitchen where he and Lee had played as youngsters, then strode out.

A battered little roughneck, leaning on the hitch rail, extended a gnarled hand. "Hyah, slick-ear," he grinned. "You are as welcome as a polecat at a hoe-down."

Clem shook hands with the old cowboy who had been ramrod on the

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Winged R since before Clem was born. "*Que es la pena*, Snuffy?" he asked tightly.

"Trouble 'nough to go round," said Snuffy McInnes. "Just at dark this evenin', a bunch of long-year-lin's was spooked by a she-bear and took out for the Magpies like all hell was tied to their tails. Lee was scairt stiff they might run into one of them Texas fever herds we been hearin' tell of and tried to head them critters. Well, damned if some squatter hadn't strung bob wire along the west side of Cloverleaf Meadow. Lee hit it in the dark. Him and his bronc and the wire got all tangled up in a dog fight. The wire won. But that ain't what I waylaid you for." His cracked voice dropped.

"You keep your eyes peeled, son. And even if your peepers ain't up to much, you start packin' a gun. If Bert Brody don't make hay while the sun shines, then I don't know a Brody when I smell one."

Dr. Smallwood came down the steps with old Rocky lumbering at his heels. When the old man caught sight of Clem he strode up and shook his fist in his face.

"I will give you one week," he roared, "to sell out that damned hardware and pay me the five thousand I advanced you. If you don't do it—I will sell you out myself. Now git!"

With Dr. Smallwood at his stirrup, Clem rode away. He didn't look back.

"Don't think too hard of the old man, son," the little physician said. "Men like him built this country. Now the country is changing, and his kind find it hard."

Clem nodded without answering and rode on.

They had just topped out over Rattlesnake Ridge, half a mile from Piedras, and were dropping down the steep trail to Windy River when both caught a sound like the distant muttering of thunder. They reined in and listened. The distant roar grew steadily louder.

Between the trail and the river bank, the twin white lines of a railway track glistened in the pale moonlight. It was a short stub line the railway had built from Piedras several years before for hauling decomposed granite for track ballast. In a cloudburst the previous winter, part of the track had washed out, leaving the end of the siding sticking out in space above a sheer drop of a hundred feet into Windy River.

Clem's big grulla threw up his head and snorted. The roar was growing like an avalanche. Dr. Smallwood's horse reared and whipped around. Both riders yanked their mounts back and watched spellbound.

Two loaded flatcars came careening and swaying around a curve and headed straight for the drop-off on the brink of the canyon wall. With a rumbling roar that shook the hill, they screamed past, shot outward into space, and a moment later struck the rocky bed of Windy River with a reverberating crash.

"Gee-e-hosophat!" whistled the little physician through his teeth. "We almost took a ride!"

"I *did!*" gritted Clem. "There went every cent of profit I've made in six months. Them flats was loaded with my barbed wire!"

"Where you going?" yelped the little doctor.

Clem had skidded the grulla down to the level and was heading up the railway siding. "I'm riding to town on this track," he called back.

"You big jughead!" exclaimed Smallwood. But he swung his bay and followed along.

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They didn't have far to go. Halfway to town they met a lone rider on a buckskin. Clem swung the roan and blocked his way.

"You ride queer trails, Mocho," he said quietly.

Mocho Perkins was the one cowhand on the Winged R he had never had any use for. A while back he had given him a good hiding for abusing a horse. Perkins had always sided Lee. Clem knew his idea was that if Lee got the Winged R he might slide into the ramrod's job.

"Since it ain't none of your damn never mind," Perkins snarled, "I will tell you Dr. Smallwood sent me to town for medicine for Lee."

"That's right," the doctor agreed.

"So you come back down this railroad siding," Clem mused.

Mocho Perkins lit a cigarette, the flare lighting up his pinched face.

"If you could see past the end of your long nose," he sneered, "you would savvy this is a short cut. Thanks to you, Lee's in bad shape. Get the hell out of my way!"

Clem reined aside to let the man by and hooked a knee over the saddlehorn. He listened thoughtfully to the fading clatter of hoofs, then wheeled again toward Piedras with the doctor beside him.

When he rode up to his store and looped the grulla's reins around the tie rack, his heavy eyebrows knitted. The veranda was crowded with scowling cowmen. Bert Brody met him at the top of the steps. The hulking B Bar B owner's bulging eyes were inflamed from booze. His voice was thick.

"This here is a committee, Ralston," he growled. "We are servin' notice here and now—"

"Stay your hand!" Clem told him, and elbowed through the crowd toward the door.

"If you are aimin' to fetch your hardware," bawled Brody, "you'd best come a-smokin'!"

Clem came out wearing a pair of old glasses he kept in his desk. "I just wanted," he remarked, "to see who all my friends is." He peered around through his thick lenses.

"Like I said," Brody resumed huskily, "this here committee is servin' notice that if you bring one more bundle of bob wire into Piedras, we aim to weight your belly with lead and heave your carcass in Windy River. You get that?"

"How come you got all them rust stains on the sleeves of your jumper?" Clem asked quietly. "You wouldn't have been fooling around a couple of flatcars, would you?"

Bert Brody's bloated face mottled. Unbelievably fast for such a bulky man, he drove his left fist in a vicious swing. Clem swayed inside the blow and put his whole hundred and ninety pounds of bone and sinew into a right cross. His bony fist collided with the point of Brody's jaw with a crunching smash. Bert Brody looped over backward, bounced down the steps on his shoulder blades, and struck, head-first, on the plank walk with a hollow thud.

Clem stood blinking on the veranda and watched four men carry Bert Brody away. The crowd scattered. But one man remained on the steps, a wizened little old cowman in patched Levis. He squinted up at Clem with troubled eyes.

"Lad," he said kindly, "me and your old man has rode the river together. I am a-tellin' you this for your own good. You'd best shake the dust of these parts offn your heels—and do so *pronto!*" He turned and hobbled off.

Clem had been sitting at his desk for perhaps ten minutes when he heard a squeak, then footsteps approaching. He swung in his old

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swivel chair and dropped his right hand close to the cedar butt of a Colt .44 that lay on a shelf.

A lean old farmer in a faded jumper and a hat with a hole in the crown rested his sharp elbows on the counter and contemplated him closely. "Evenin'!" he said.

"What's that you got?" inquired Clem.

He was gazing at a piece of string tied around his visitor's little finger.

"Cripes!" chuckled the old farmer. "I like to forgot. That there was tied on by that no-account spitfire of a gal of mine. Connie said it was to remind me to tell you 'howdy.'" His tone altered. "Was you calculating, Clem, to fetch in some more barb' wire quick?"

Clem plunked his sombrero on the floor, scratched his tawny thatch and built a smoke. Wrinkles deepened at the corners of his kindly gray eyes.

"If you ain't," the oldster resumed thinly, "us settlers is plumb through. Our barley is just heading out nice. By staying in the saddle night and day, we've kept the cattle out. But if Texas trail herds is to be swung up through the Piedras, the which I hear they is, we will be feeding our young ones next winter on roots."

Muscles whitened along Clem's flat jaws. In a flash he pictured the pitiful homes of the settlers in the bottom lands—homes they had fought tooth and nail to hew out of the wilderness to house and provide for their families. In his mind's eye he saw, too, a picture of a laughing girl riding beside him on her calico pony, her brown eyes sparkling, her silky bronze hair tossing in the wind.

He ground his cigarette under his heel, cocked his hat on his head and started out. The light in his gray eyes now was cold and bleak.

"Pop," he promised, "you will get your wire!"

A little before dusk next evening, Clem Ralston sat cross-legged on a tarp on top of a towering wagon load of barbed wire he had freighted clear from Parker's Crossing. On the crest of a hogback he stopped his team to blow and gazed broodingly out over the trail ahead.

Far below him he could see the crooked gash in the land that marked Gooseneck Gorge, the only entrance into the Piedras country. Beyond that lay the rolling reaches of the Winged R. He had timed his arrival to cross the old home outfit after dark. He started to cluck to the horses, but caught the sound in his teeth.

From far ahead he heard the faint rattle of gunfire. Then he saw something.

Off to the south, where the country sloped gently toward the Little Brazos, the land was black with cattle. And, as he listened he could faintly hear the low rumble of bawling herds. He had an itchy feeling in his hair. He swallowed hard.

Always before, Texas trail herds had been driven north over a course that followed the Little Brazos away east of the Stony Mountains. But this year, due to drought in that section, it had been rumored that the vast herds headed for Dodge City were to be swung up through the Piedras range. Nobody had really believed it. Nobody had really believed the Texans would deliberately head straight into bloody war.

But here they were, to strip the grass lands of the Piedras like a swarm of long-horned locusts, leaving in their wake the dread Texas fever. And if they reached the bottom lands, those little homes of the settlers that had been won with blood would be transformed over-

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night into a waste land. Nothing on earth could save those bottoms except the barbed wire Clem was sitting on. He lashed his team into a run.

Dusk was purpling the hills when he went heeling down into the depths of Gooseneck Gorge. The crackling of gunfire had grown steadily louder in his ears. Halfway through the gorge he careened full tilt into a bunch of men scattered in a skirmish line among the loose boulders that cluttered up the bottom of the narrow gorge. Their backs were to him, but at the screaming of his wagon wheels several of the fighters in tall Texas sombreros began hurling lead at him.

A slug snarled off a roll of wire behind Clem's shoulders. Another splintered the stock of the whip in his hand. His hat went sailing into a cholla cactus. But lashing and yipping, he went crashing through that skirmish line.

A hundred yards farther on he hit the second skirmish line he knew would be there—the hard-hitting scrappers of the Piedras defending their range against the trail-herd horde. Only through the Gooseneck could those herds reach the Piedras. And Clem well knew that before they did the gorge would run red with blood. He meant to go through that second skirmish line, too. But it struck him maybe strategy would serve better than speed. He slowed his team.

He was in the midst of the smoke-wreathed riflemen when old Rocky Ralston leaped toward one side of the wagon and Bert Brody to the other. Old Rocky's left arm was in a sling. Blood stained his wild gray hair. His voice rose in a bellow. Clem stopped.

"Get down off that load of damnation, you damned cub!" roared the old man, waving a carbine. "Here's your chance to prove you're of the Ralston blood. This here is a fight to the last man—except you'll notice there ain't no settlers here. It ain't only our grass we're battling for. Every last one of them blasted longhorns has got Texas fever. If they ever get through this gorge we won't have a head of stock left on our ranges. Get down off there!"

Clem exploded the long lash of his whip behind the ears of his foaming horses. The team squatted into their collars, quivered for an instant, then lunged forward with a jangle of trace chains.

Clem spat out a mouthful of alkali dust. "Rocky!" he croaked. "I got a plan!"

"Plan be damned!" howled the old man. "I said *get down!*"

Bert Brody's riata came hissing through the air. Clem tried to duck behind a roll of wire, but the rope got him by the arm. Before he could shake loose it almost tore his arm out of the socket. He left that load as though he'd been grabbed by a tree trap.

He turned a somersault in the air and landed with an arm cunningly bent under him. A skidding hind wheel took a slice off his scalp. But with the spring of a panther he lit on his feet, snatched Brody's rope off his arm and grabbed the tail gate of the wagon as it whirled by.

He struck the top of the load, and Brody's slug struck him at the same instant. He knew he was hit, but he didn't know where. Barbed wire gashed his hands and knees. Hot lead whistled around his ears. But he made it. With loose reins flying in the wind and his broncs gone crazy, he went winging on through the gorge on two wheels.

Half an hour later he was back

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But this time he was astride a harnessed horse, without the wagon. He lit on his heels and found his old man sprawled behind a boulder. "Pa!" he croaked, through dust and smoke. "I got a *plan!*"

"You yaller-bellied skunk!" yelped Rocky. He glared malevolently out of bloodshot eyes. "Do your planning with a Winchester. When this is over, I'll *plan* you! Can't you see them damn Texans is licking the stuffing out of us? Get to smokin'!"

Clem saw there was no use talking. He saw too that this might be the best way to win his point. The Piedras men were being steadily driven back, even though they had been reinforced by every settler from the bottoms, rodded by old Gil Northrup. As they retreated, they dragged along a dozen wounded, leaving behind crumpled forms it would do no good to drag. Clem wiped his glasses on his sleeve, hauled out his old cedar-butted .44.

But it was no go. More Texans kept coming from the herds. The Piedras riflemen were being ruthlessly whittled down, driven remorselessly backward. Just at nightfall they retreated around a sharp bend in the gorge, caught sight of what was behind them, and stood with gaping mouths. Old Rocky Ralston's red-rimmed eyes threatened to pop out of his head.

"Hell's hinges!" he squawked, pointing a bloody hand.

Back of the bend, extending fifty feet from wall to wall of the gorge, was the wickedest-looking barbed-wire barricade a man ever set eye to. By using the trunks of scrub-oaks growing against the walls, Clem had strung and tangled his wire into a devilish maze of deadly prongs. Ten men could hold that fort against an army.

Clem had the senseless form of old Gil Northrup draped over one shoulder. With his free arm he pointed toward one end of his wire fortification. "Get around there!" he yelled. "I left a hole for us."

The moon had risen when the Texans quit trying. A lanky rider waving a white flag tied to a stick rode up the gorge and viewed the barbed wire over a windrow of the lifeless bodies of too many of his men. Old Rocky went up and faced the Texan across the barrier of barbs. The trail boss' voice was a hollow croak.

"You win!" he said. "But you ain't goin' to deny water to our parched steers. You cain't be that ornery."

"Listen!" bellowed old Rocky. "Since you are such damn fine fightin' men, I will tell you something." The old rawhider coughed up blood and dust and pointed a long arm back down the gorge toward the trail herds.

"Swing your stuff and make a night drive due southwest. By daybreak you'll strike Snake-eye Creek, where there's water enough to drown all the longhorns in Texas, including their fever. From there swing west around the Sawtooth Hills, then north. If you fellers can trail drive like you can fight, you'll hit Dodge City without ever once missing a right nice bed ground. *Sabe?*"

"See you in hell!" croaked the Texan, and spun his mount to carry out instructions. "And when I do, compadre," he called above the rattle of his pony's hoofs, "me and you'll take up where we left off."

Everyone in Piedras was jammed into Clem Ralston's hardware store. Clem had laid old Gil Northrup out on the counter and was anxiously watching Dr. Smallwood work on him. Tough old Northrup sat up

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and opened his bright eyes. They fell on Clem.

"Son," said the old farmer with a grin, "you sure made one hell of a delivery of that barb' wire."

"That's what Bert Brody said," cut in a gangling cowman dryly, "when he got tangled in the stuff and shot all to mincemeat." The gangling cattleman nudged Clem's elbow and spoke so everyone could hear:

"Just before Bert cashed in, he told several of us boys it was him potted at you in Chuckwalla Wash, and likewise run them two cars of wire into Windy Canyon."

Clem nodded. He reached out and lifted Gil Northrup's left hand. Tied to the little finger was a bloody piece of string. Old Gil answered his unspoken question.

"Cripes!" he chuckled. "I like to clean forgot. That there was put on by that little spitfire gal of mine. It was to remind me to come home and to fetch you along."

Old Rocky Ralston slapped his big son on the back so hard he nearly knocked him off his feet. "And then you come on out to the old Winged R," he roared, "alone or . . . or . . . ridin' double. Lee, he is doin' splendid. Him and I agree if we're going to run our beef up into the Magpies, leaving the bottoms for Northrup here and his like, there'll be aplenty work for the three of us, without using your eyes too much." Old Rocky cleared his throat hoarsely.

"You see, son—" The fierce old cattleman gritted his teeth. Even yet it came hard. "If it hadn't been for them fool hoemen sidin' us like a bundle of bobcats, the whole caboodle of us cow-chasers would be sleeping sound in pine boxes. Them fellers will do to take along."

Clem reached out and gripped his father's hand, then wiped his glasses on his sleeve—not for dust this time. Snicking a piece of barbed wire from a roll with a pair of pincers, he looped it around one of the old rawhider's fingers.

"Just to make sure you don't buck loose from your memory," he grinned. "You old fire-eater!"

He picked Gil Northrup up and draped him gently over his shoulder again. "*Vamanos!*" he said softly. "If we ain't home soon, Connie'll shoot our eyes out!"

NEXT WEEK

STREET & SMITH PRESENT

**Deacon Wildcat**

A COMPLETE NOVEL

by MARK LISH

*Murder laughed lazily and Death yawned in answer.*

DON'T MISS THIS UNUSUAL STORY!

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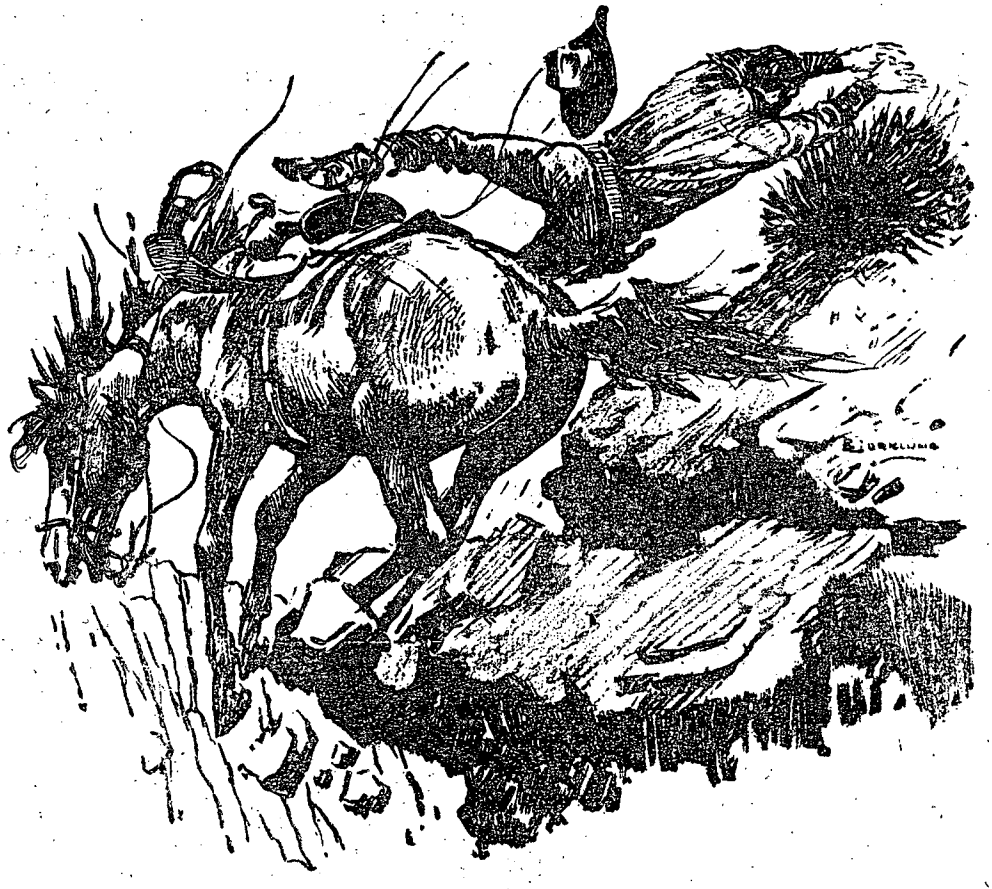

# THE BAR U TWINS RIDE TWISTED TRAILS

***Death snatched at the Bar U twins, and two men who shared a single face laughed at Danger and spoke with six-guns!***

## By Charles E. Barnes

It was no place for a horse to spook. The black gorge, yawning hungrily beside the narrow mountain shelf, brought a frown to Tom Carter's normally sunny face. He began to wish the trusty sorrel he'd left with the blacksmith to be shod was under his saddle instead of this paint cowhorse he'd borrowed to ride with the posse out of Mescal.

Although it wasn't a trail, the brush-fringed ledge looked safe or he'd never have risked it, even though he was hurrying to reach the meeting place. Faintly, he could hear the muffled roar of rushing

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water, an awesome undertone. Apparently the maw of the giant fissure guarded an underground stream.

He was almost past the narrow stretch when an abrupt sinking sensation gripped him. Dry pebbles rattled. Icy fingers touched his spine. Rock was crumbling beneath his mount's hind hoofs!

The horse suddenly went berserk. Snorting in terror, it lunged ahead in a wild, frantic effort. Its forehoofs jabbed down sharply, jarring Tom's body to the core.

"Lost his head," the thought flashed through his mind.

Dust swirled up in a yellow cloud. The savage jolt broke loose shale weakened by freeze and thaw of centuries. A whole section of ledge gave way in a single block.

As the saddle seemed to drop from beneath him, every fibre in his lean young body tingled. It was a sensation he'd dreamed of when he was a kid. A terrifying, sickening feeling, as if his insides were trying to cram themselves into his throat.

In the brief flash of time that the slide was gathering momentum, he yanked his feet from the oxbows and swung his arms like a swimmer desperately backstroking. His fingers touched scaly brush; and like a drowning man grasping for a straw, he clutched it fiercely.

His spurred heel clacked against the cliff rock. Abruptly he realized that he was no longer sliding, that he was hanging by his fingertips.

A soul-tearing squeal floated out of the murky depths. Then only the soft, agonizing sound of roots severing from the rock crevices above disturbed the silence. Dirt trickled into Tom's eyes, blinding him. Clammy sweat streamed from his pores. Fire seemed to sweep his tortured muscles. He felt himself being lowered inch by inch, as if into an empty grave.

Pulling gusts of air into his lungs, he dug in his toes. But the rock was slick, treacherous, almost a sheer drop. Suddenly the brush came away in his hands.

Down the breast of the cliff he slid, faster and faster. He clawed at the rocks with his fingers, ripping his nails to bits.

Sharp points shredded his clothing, gouged his flesh. Once his gun-belt hooked something solid. It checked his fall momentarily, then slipped off.

Suddenly he could feel no more rock skidding past. He was dropping like a plummet. The air seemed to boil up on all sides.

Then the sickening smash. As if the whole earth had struck him a pile-driver blow, crushing him into oblivion!

## II.

When Tom Carter opened his eyes, he was gazing at a crack of blue sky fringed by withered bushes some forty feet above. His head pounded harshly and his body felt numb.

Rolling on his side, he found himself staring over a six-foot ledge. Far below, a dark mass blotted the jagged rocks beside a trickle of water. Horsehair at his fingertips told Tom the beast had scraped the ledge as it plunged to death.

As feeling seeped into his battered body, Tom sat up and examined himself. His feet-first landing and sand on the ledge had saved him from broken bones. A lump the size of a rock toad marked where his head had struck something hard. The wide brim of Stetson was crumpled into a crude cushion for his skull.

As he took stock of the situation, he began to wonder if he wouldn't

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be just as well off down there with the horse. The gorge, averaging thirty feet wide, zigzagged into the mountainside past his obstructed view. It was going to be mighty reluctant about giving up its victim.

Although it wasn't so far to the top, there was no way possible to climb without a rope. Part way up, the cliff was actually overhanging. It would have baffled a human fly. Nor was there anything but a vertical drop down to the underground stream.

On one side the ledge dropped away abruptly. The other side petered out to a few protruding lumps as it rounded a sharp bend in the gorge wall. Tom couldn't see around the bend.

"Maybe the shelf widens there," he thought. "It's my only hope to shake this hole in the ground without help."

He knew the chances that anyone would find him were mighty slim.

Sheriff Torby's posse had scattered wide to comb the Crooked Horn Breaks for tracks of four bandits who had robbed the stage-line office, killed two men and made off with four or five thousand dollars. Sheriff Jim Torby had drafted Tom and his twin brother Jerry to ride with the posse.

When Tom didn't show up at the meeting place, they would undoubtedly begin a search. But they could comb the blind canyons and tangled, broken wilderness that was Crooked Horn Breaks for a month and maybe never stumble onto the narrow crack in the rock. Thirst would mow him down in two or three days.

Having lost both six-guns, he yelled once, experimentally. The sound bounced back and forth between the walls until his voice was a hollow roar. He doubted if it would carry far above the top.

He began the perilous snail crawl along the remnants of the ledge. He was rounding the bend when a chunk of that treacherous, crumbly stuff broke beneath his weight.

Desperately, he flung himself toward the next step. His bruised fingers found a cleft in the wall, and he slowly drew himself up on the foot-wide shelf.

"Whew! Another close shave," he panted.

He craned his neck until he could see around the sharp apex. His heart sank, and the hope in his blue eyes faded. No sign of a ledge there.

With the connecting link gone, there was no way left for him to return to the wide spot where he had first landed.

Bitterly he blamed himself for a reckless fool. With the numbing cold of mountain night, his frosted fingers wouldn't hold their grip to the niche. One slip. Then the plunge!

He yelled out again, but the echoes only mocked him.

He'd often thought of death in terms of blazing six-guns, but never in the lonely, wracking torment that the night would bring.

An hour later, Tom Carter shifted his cramped body and yelled for the twentieth time. The sun must be slanting toward the mountaintops, for the depths were growing dank and cold. The night was near, and with it—

His dismal thoughts were suddenly shattered, dramatically, without warning.

## III.

A high-pitched, hysterical scream rang through the gorge. Echoes curdled the close confines. A human figure, its arms and legs writhing grotesquely, swished past a few feet away in a shower of dust and shale.

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Watching with horrified eyes, Tom saw the man flatten on the rocks below seconds before he heard the dull *splat* of the fall.

He tore his gaze from the gruesome sight. Had the posse found him already? Had one of them lost his life in an attempted rescue?

Tom shuddered. The overhang and the ragged bushes above masked from sight everything but the patch of open sky that seemed so wonderfully blue.

A hoarse yell boomed out from above. He couldn't make out the words. The echoes made of them a meaningless jumble.

Tom forced an answering cry from his lungs. Another yell sounded. Pebbles rattled down the steep walls. Then silence, thick and gloomy.

At even intervals, Tom shouted or whistled. It seemed ages had passed before a lariat end dropped into sight. Nothing had ever looked so good as that hempen ribbon. It dangled twenty feet to one side, near where the man had hurtled to his death. Tom yelled and risked waving an arm.

The rope began to shift toward him. It inched along the cliff, at a level with his knees. The concave pattern of the wall was deeper where Tom was perched, and when the rope finally crept to its nearest point, it dangled a good six feet out beyond his reach.

"I sure hope the other end is looped tight," Tom breathed, as he bunched his muscles.

Blood was pounding at his temples as he judged the distance with narrowed eyes. His muscles flexed in a powerful spring. An awful feeling of suspension in midair. Then his long fingers were wrapped about the worn riata. It snapped taut, gave a foot, then held.

Tom climbed slowly, making sure of each grip. Near the top, he looked up into a pair of glittering black eyes set close together above a nose as long and sharp as a woodpecker's beak. The stranger's scowl expressed both surprise and keen disappointment.

"Shecks, this ain't Shorty. Nothin' but a baby-faced yearlin'. Shall I drap the rope, Sledge?"

A head the shape of a giant hammer crowded into view. The rugged face, scarred and battered into gray bluntness, was stony. "Haul him up, Neep. Mebby we got a use for him."

The brawny giant called Sledge reached down and seized Tom by his shirt collar. Tom felt himself dragged up to ground level like a gaffed salmon.

Gulping great gusts of air, he staggered to his feet and faced the men. A third man appeared. He was bland-faced and looked like a storekeeper; but a quiet menace hovered in his slate eyes, as bleak and wintery as snow clouds.

Tom no longer doubted that this was the robber band that the posse was chasing. Each of the three looked fully capable of cold-blooded murder.

The sharp-nosed man they called Neep snapped in a spiteful voice: "Where's Shorty? Blast it, Shorty's my side-kick. Effen he's—"

Sledge pushed him aside. "Shet up, Neep." His pale eyes devoured Tom. "Shorty's went to the bottom, heh?"

Tom nodded. "Smashed to a pulp. How'd it happen he went overboard?"

"We heard runnin' water down there. Shorty was tryin' to find a way down to it when this cussed shale busted loose with him. You ain't explained your own pickle yet."

"I'm lookin' for the wild and bad

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ones. My horse went plumb to the bottom. I hung up on a ledge. I'd been a goner if you hadn't dropped that rope."

Sledge nodded. He seemed to accept Tom's words as meaning he was brush-popping wild cattle.

Neep butted in, "Aw, why waste time with this slick-ear? Shove him over the cliff. Let's get to huntin' water again. My tongue's hangin' out."

"Shet up, Neep," Sledge gruffed. "You savvy this country, cowboy?"

"As well as anybody," Tom said truthfully. Large sections of the Crooked Horn Breaks had never been explored by any white man.

"We pulled a job in Mescal last night, cowboy. Shorty was goin' to lead us through this cross section of hell. A stray slug drained our water bag. The only springs Shorty knew of was dried up. We doubled back to throw off the posse. Reckon we lost 'em, but we're nigh dead for a drink. Lead us to water and on through to open country, cowboy, and Shorty's share of the swag is yours."

Across his sweaty face Tom passed a hand that was still trembling from his ordeal. He had little choice. He was certain they'd kill him if he refused. But even if they didn't, he couldn't forget he owed his life to them, a debt they were giving him a chance to repay.

He looked the rugged leader in the eye. "I don't want any stolen money. I'll take you out of the Breaks because you saved my neck. O. K.?"

Sledge grunted assent.

A suspicious gleam speared from Neep's close-set eyes. "Yeah? How we know you won't herd us back to Mescal jug?"

Sledge's tone was pointed. "Not if he wants to keep his own neck, he won't. He's a mite taller'n Shorty, but he's got the same color hair and the same shaped pan. He'll be ridin' Shorty's bronc, and no blasted sheriff will swaller his yarn about us fishin' him outta this hell hole. If he turns us over, he'll hang with the rest of us."

Tom squelched the grin gathering on his face. Naturally, they didn't suspect he had been riding with the sheriff. His youthfully innocent face fooled a lot of men. Besides, a posse usually rides in a group.

Neep started to growl, but the robber chief silenced him. "Shet up, Neep. Fetch up Shorty's nag, Cleaver. We're on the move."

The bland-faced man was close-mouthed as a clam. He gave the reins to Tom. They mounted and rode off, Tom leading the way to the nearest spring. Neep cursed all creation in a squeaky cackle. The others were grimly silent.

## IV.

With the flaming orange sunset, dusk flung its swift chill over the sweltering breaks. Pressing forward at a brisk clip, Tom searched the maze of brushy draws and spired humps with wide eyes that missed no familiar sign. He wanted to reach water and a camp spot before the blackness of night made travel next to impossible.

It was mighty queer, he was thinking. He'd started out that morning to help capture the very men that he was now aiding to escape.

Often during the ride, he'd toyed with the idea of swinging them back toward where the posse was most likely to be found. Each time, he thrust this from his mind. These three had saved his life. The fact that they thought they were saving

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their own companion didn't materially change matters.

They had saved him from the fate that had been Shorty's. And it wasn't in him to pay them back with lawmen lead or a hangman's noose no matter how much they deserved it.

Finally they reached a small spring, nestling among giant boulders at the foot of a wide, gently rising slope. They watered swiftly, then pushed on up the hill.

Near the center of the brush-tangled incline, Tom slid off his tired horse. Scowling, Sledge surveyed the shoulder-high juniper bushes and buckbrush.

"Devil of a place to camp," he grumbled.

Tom issued the orders. "Mend your water bag. Then go back to the spring and fill it. The broncs can get a bellyful of grass if you picket 'em in that open stretch below this brush."

Grumbling, Neep looked after the tired horses. When Cleaver finished repairing the bag, he started down through the brush. Neep returned to where Sledge and Tom hunkered down in the sand. They chewed strips of jerked beef. Neep cursed because they didn't dare risk a fire.

Sledge gulped his tough beef. "How much farther to open country? This cussed hodge-podge gets on my nerves. Never know when we'll run smack into a posse around the next brush—"

The sharp bark of a rifle shattered the silence of the Breaks. It came so suddenly, without warning, that for an instant the trio sat stunned. Then Neep was snatching up his snub-nosed saddle gun.

Before he could jump up, Sledge knocked him sprawling with a powerful sweep of his fist.

"Keep down," he whispered. His heavy-lidded eyes sought Tom. They narrowed to slits. "If I thought you knew that posse was headed this way—"

Genuine surprise rippled through Tom Carter. He'd figured the posse would wait at the meeting place until he appeared, or else swing back searching for him.

"You're yappin' up the wrong tree," he said calmly. "Give me a little time and I'll prove it."

Snarling, Neep still clutched the carbine. His eyes glittered snakelike when he fastened them on Tom. It was plain that only fear of the husky leader kept Neep from planting a bullet in Tom's heart. Tom could explain Neep's intense hatred only by the bitterness caused by his pal's death.

A twig cracked close by. Sledge swung up a bone-handled six-gun.

The bushes parted and Cleaver's round, almost genial face came into view. He was hatless. His bleak eyes were frigid and his pudgy hands hung low over the Colt stocks at his thighs. He flopped down the empty water bag. "It's them law dawgs, a'right. They rode in just now. One spotted me halfway to the spring. Shot my lid off. I ducked in the brush and sneaked back. We got to light a shuck out of here."

"How the blazes?" Sledge blurted. "We can't climb our nags. They're out in plain sight. We can't make it on foot, because this brush fizzles out halfway down the hill and the top is bare rock. We're trapped, blast it!"

Like wolves at bay, they stared at Tom Carter, their eyes ugly. Distrust hardened the leader's face.

"Keep your shirts on," Tom said coolly. "We're safe enough here until dark. They know we're in this brush, but don't know just where.



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If we're careful, we can see out on all sides without bein' spotted."

Sledge nodded, his expression again blank.

Neep was peering nervously through the bushtops. "I can see one of 'em plain," he cackled. "There's an open notch through the brush. I can see him skulkin' around a rock. He's a big feller with white hair and a star on his vest."

"Sheriff Jim Torby," Tom said. "A bad man to monkey with."

"The main law dawg hisself, huh? I could drive that star clean through his backbone."

"Ditch that six-gun, you shallerbrained jackass," Sledge flared. "Ain't you got no sense atall? One shot and they'll blast us to mincemeat."

"Aw, don't go off half-cocked. I said I *could* nail him."

"Save your slugs till they'll do some good," Sledge growled.

"Yeah? What about when it's dark? They can hem us in and fire this brush. It'll burn like a powder house. What about that, huh? I say we plug this whelp and make a run for it."

"Humph. If you rodded this gang, Neep, we wouldn't last a week."

Tom helped himself to another strip of beef. "Save your wind. You'll need it later. Follow me up hill a ways."

On hands and knees, Tom led the way through the dense thicket. Twenty yards up he stopped and pointed toward a black hole in the ground the size of a bear den.

"Pickin' out your grave, yearlin'?" Neep asked scornfully.

Tom took off his kerchief and dangled it above the gaping fissure. A draft of air caused the cloth to flutter.

Understanding came into the hammerlike leader's eyes. "I get it. A tunnel through the hill."

"Right. It winds around, plenty narrow, then widens cavelike, mouthin' into the next canyon. That's why I picked this place to camp."

"I'll be cussed."

Cleaver's bland face didn't change.

A grudging respect mingled with the suspicion in Neep's glittering eyes. "Well, what're we waitin' for?"

"Water," Tom said grimly. "They ain't any the next fifty miles. We can't take the broncs through this hole. It'll be foot travel, and plenty hot when you run out of this brush onto the rocks."

Sledge cursed. "We got to have that bag full! Why not hide out until they leave here?"

"They'd track us come daylight if we was still in the brush. The time to get water is now. It's dusky enough so a man that knows exactly where the spring lays might sneak down there and back without bein' spotted."

When they returned, Sledge handed him the water bag.

"Hold on," Neep yelped. "How do we know he won't git down there and flag the sheriff?"

Tom offered the beak-nosed outlaw the container. "Go yourself. I ain't stuck on the job."

Growling an excuse, Neep thrust his paws into his ragged Levi pockets. No one else spoke.

In his own mind, Tom was exulting. Here was a situation that would enable him to repay the outlaws for saving his life. While hunting wild mustangs, he had stumbled onto this tunnel. He'd never happened to tell anyone, not even his twin brother Jerry.

If he could get water, lead the bandits through the tunnel and head

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them out of the brush, he would be saving each of their lives. This would square things. Of course, they might kill him when he tried to turn back. He'd have to take his chances on that.

He was tying the bag to his belt when Sledge hammered his shoulder with a granite fist.

"Good luck, kid. And go all-fired easy."

## V.

When the faint hiss of Tom's clothing against the branches faded away, Sledge cracked the silence.

"If he makes it, we'll have water. If they spot him, we'll be as well off as before. You see him, Neep?"

Like a caged animal, Neep was gawking through his notch in the brush. "Naw. But I can see another one of them hounds in that open spot. They's a patch of white sand in front of it. Light reflects. Shows him plain. He looks like a pot-bellied barkeep. Now he's moving away."

Cleaver shifted uneasily. "Don't like it—lettin' that kid out of our sight. Smarter'n he looks."

"Only chance we got," Sledge defended.

Neep's snarl was profane. "We better have shoved him down that hole where we found him and taken our chances alone. Mebby we wouldn't've run into no posse."

Time dragged heavily. Sledge rolled a smoke, then crumpled it to bits, not daring to strike a match.

After a while, Cleaver spoke, as if thinking aloud. "No shots. He's reached the spring."

Neep's mutter cracked viciously. "Squealin' to that badge-toter by now."

Sledge fingered a black six-gun nervously. "He'd be a fool to do that. Nobody would swaller that yarn of hisn. They'd stretch his neck."

Cleaver's voice was softly quiet. "If he's reached the spring, what's to keep him from sneakin' on past into the brush—gettin' away from all of us?"

Sledge's grip tightened on his six-gun. "Why didn't you think of that before?" His eyelids closed down to thin chips. Then he calmed, speaking softly. "I never missed it yet, judgin' a man. I'd bet my bottom simoleon that kid plays it square."

"What would you do in his place?" Cleaver purred.

Tight-lipped, they stared at each other. Each knew what the other was thinking, and all of them were thinking the same thing.

Sledge cleared his throat. "We'll wait longer. He ain't hardly had time to get back yet, draggin' a five-gallon bag of water."

Suddenly, Neep stared through the bushes as if he saw a ghost. His eyes bulged, and he lifted a trembling finger. A bitter curse rose in his throat, half-strangled by his fury.

"It's that slick-ear. The dirty, double-crossin' son of a polecat! I'll blow his schemin' brains out, the low-down pup!"

He whipped the rifle to his shoulder, his glittering eyes lining the sights in a flash.

Sledge moved with a speed deceptive in such a huge hombre. His steely grasp closed on Neep's wrist, wrenched sharply. The gun hawk hissed and dropped the weapon.

He didn't fight back. He just stabbed a finger down the slope toward the rocks.

Sledge stared, and his pale eyes bulged. Outlined in the peculiar

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opening there beyond the white sand, a wide-shouldered and solemn-faced young cowboy, the wind ruffling his blond hair, stood silently watching the slope.

The outlaw chief heard Cleaver's hissed curse as the cowboy moved quickly behind the boulder.

"The kid, sure as blazes," Sledge declared grimly.

"He's tagged up with the posse," Cleaver added.

"The fork-tongued whelp. It's no dice down that tunnel now. Only chance we got is to gallop for our cayuses and whack leather like the devil was ridin' drag."

"It's too far. We can't make it," Cleaver cautioned.

"Not now," Sledge conceded. "But mebby if we waited till it got darker—"

The dusk thickened. Above a lone stunted pine, the first evening star glittered coldly in the fading blue of the sky.

A dry, rasping rustle sounded loud in the tense silence. The bandit trio jerked erect, red-rimmed eyes glaring at the thickets.

The branches parted, and Tom Carter crawled into the tiny open space. A wide grin heightened the innocence of his ruddy face. "Thought it was takin' me a year to snake up that hill."

Hauling the gorged water bag from his belt, he held it out to Sledge.

The big outlaw's curse was savage, vicious. "To hell with it!"

Abruptly Tom found himself staring into a black gun throat. His grin faded. A queer dryness came into his throat. The water bag dropped unheeded.

Sledge snapped his words crisply. "For a baby-faced squirt, you're long on gall, cowboy. Sneakin' back here actin' innercent as a day-old calf. I s'pose you was going to shoo us down that tunnel right into a canyon full of johnny law dawgs. How about it?"

Deeply puzzled, Tom stared from one to the other. The skin across Neep's cheekbones drew taut as his teeth bared wolfishly. His eyes burned like coals. The hammer under his thumb clicked.

"We all seen yuh squattin' behind that rock—right down in the middle of 'em. I'm blowin' your brains out before you're out of my sight. I should have did it before." He shot a withering side glance at Sledge.

Puzzlement fled from Tom's mind. "I savvy now. My twin brother Jerry is ridin' with the posse. People can't tell us apart. They call us the Bar U twins. It was him you seen."

Sledge laughed scornfully. "Cowboy, you sure got a gift for lyin'. It's plain enough this water hokum was only a fake to hold us here till you talked to the sheriff. I'm bettin' there's plenty of water right over the next hill. Mebby you've salted down our hides. But it ain't doin' you no good."

"You've got things tangled up," Tom insisted. "I really got a twin brother. But he don't know about that tunnel. All you got to do is crawl through it, and you'll be plumb safe."

"Yeah, safe in handcuffs. Not by a long shot, we don't crawl down in that trap. While half the posse is roostin' on the other end, waitin' for us to stick our necks out, it leaves this side short of guns. If we can make it to the broncs, we'll bust 'er wide open."

"You're plumb loco!" Tom exploded. "They'll mow you down like hay."

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Sledge shrugged grimly. "We'll take our chances and so will you. You're leadin' the way. Savvy?"

## VI.

Sheer exasperation burned Tom's face red. He started to protest once more, then closed his lips with a snap. As payment for saving his life, he was offering the outlaws their freedom. They wouldn't take it because they didn't trust him. Nothing he could say would change their minds.

"It's plenty dark enough now," Cleaver said softly.

"Wait," Neep barked. "I'll start a blaze. They'll be gawkin' at it while we pop out of the brush down below."

Sledge nodded. "Bueno."

Flame crackled to life in Neep's fingers. The yellow flare died down, then leaped hungrily, licking into the brush as the wind caught it full force.

"Get goin'!" The renegade chief prodded Tom sharply with his gun muzzle. His face was grim, gray, without mercy. "Keep down till we run out of cover. Then rip for the broncs. They'll be three guns on your backbone, cowboy. One false move and we'll drill you to rags."

There was nothing Tom could do but turn his back and head down the slope.

Boots slithered in the sand. The swaying bushes trembled. Behind them, the fire crackled angrily, as if to warn all living creatures to make way.

Sweat oozed from Tom's forehead. It dripped off in a stream. Close at his heels, the wheezing breath of the big outlaw lent rhythm to Neep's mumbled curses.

There was no turning aside. They'd shoot him in a flash if he tried it. He could almost feel the stab of Neep's inflamed eyes on the back of his neck. Little shivers crawled there. His fists clenched helplessly, and a hopeless, leaden feeling squelched the exultation he had felt on his return from the spring.

If the law riders recognized him, they'd hesitate to fire. Crafty Sledge was figuring that. But it was pretty dark now. Mighty slim chance.

When the bandits charged out of the brush, a leaden hail would meet them. And the first bullets would crash into his body. Maybe bullets from his twin brother's guns. After they found him, maybe they'd think he really was one of the robbers.

But what they thought afterward didn't much concern Tom now. Just ahead of him, the last scrubby bush was a gray pattern.

A tiny spearhead of flame in the strip of dead grass just beyond made him blink. He stopped, and felt the cruel jab of a gun muzzle between his shoulder blades.

"Run, blast you!" came the hoarse whisper.

As Tom's long legs churned through the last of the cover, he saw the tiny flame fan out, sweeping toward him, knee-high. Not forty feet distant, a man in cowboy garb suddenly rose up from the grass.

Tom heard Sledge's muffled command. "There goes the skunk that fired the grass. Beef him."

At the sound, the looming figure whirled. The fireglow danced across the space, lighting up his features with a ghostly iridescence. Again, Tom Carter slowed instinctively. It was his twin brother Jerry!

A quick yelp of surprise. Then Sledge's lurid oath. "The kid wasn't lyin'. Back to the tunnel!"

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Jerry was tugging at his holstered gun as Tom covered the short space between them. He tried to twist aside, but Tom was too quick. As his shoulder socked into Jerry's ribs, he heard the bellow of a six-gun, and knew instantly that Neep was seizing the chance to make good his threat.

The bullet's squeal ended abruptly. Jerry's gasp of pain was torture to Tom's ears. Then Jerry was sprawling backward from the force of Tom's plunge.

As his head turned, Tom glimpsed a windrow of brilliant flames spreading a long line from the point where Neep had dropped his match.

Neep's howl echoed his shot: "Tunnel, hell! We'd be roasted alive."

If it was Neep shooting again, or a bullet from the posse, Tom didn't know. But he plainly heard the hot whisper of lead near his ear as he again broke into a crouching run down the slope. With the report crashing in his ears, he flung up his hands, buckled at the knees, and pitched headlong down the hill. Landing on his face in a scattering of gravel, he rolled completely over twice and lay motionless in a limp, awkward sprawl.

Faintly he heard the outlaw leader's yell. "The kid's down! Leave him lay!"

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the renegades racing past him, their guns spitting heavy thunder into the night.

A sharp-heeled boot clunked down on his neck. The jolting pain of it made him flinch. Then the bandits were past him in a concerted rush.

In the reflection of the fire, he could see the horses, badly frightened by the fire and commotion, pawing and lunging. One snapped its picket rope and rocketed off into the darkness. Another stopped a stray bullet and slogged down kicking.

He saw Neep lurch, haul himself up, and stumble on, swearing a bitter stream.

A ragged line of red flame needled from the rocks below. The night rocked to drunken thunder. Smoke swirled skyward in fantastic patterns.

Abruptly the outlaw guns were silent, and three huddled shapes blotched the slope down there by the frantic horses. Three huddled shapes that didn't move again.

As the posse came swarming over the rocks, Tom Carter drew himself out of the gravelly, ditchlike depression. He saw that Jerry was sitting up, swabbing at a bloody spot high on his shoulder. To the smallest detail of dress, the Carter twins looked exactly alike.

Jerry's eyes widened. "Tom, you old buzzard. When you didn't show up, we figured you'd turned back to Mescal. How'd you get shuffled in with those long-riders?"

A mixture of somberness and gladness came into Tom's eyes as he smiled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said.

And somehow, he knew that was the truth.

T ANCHOR

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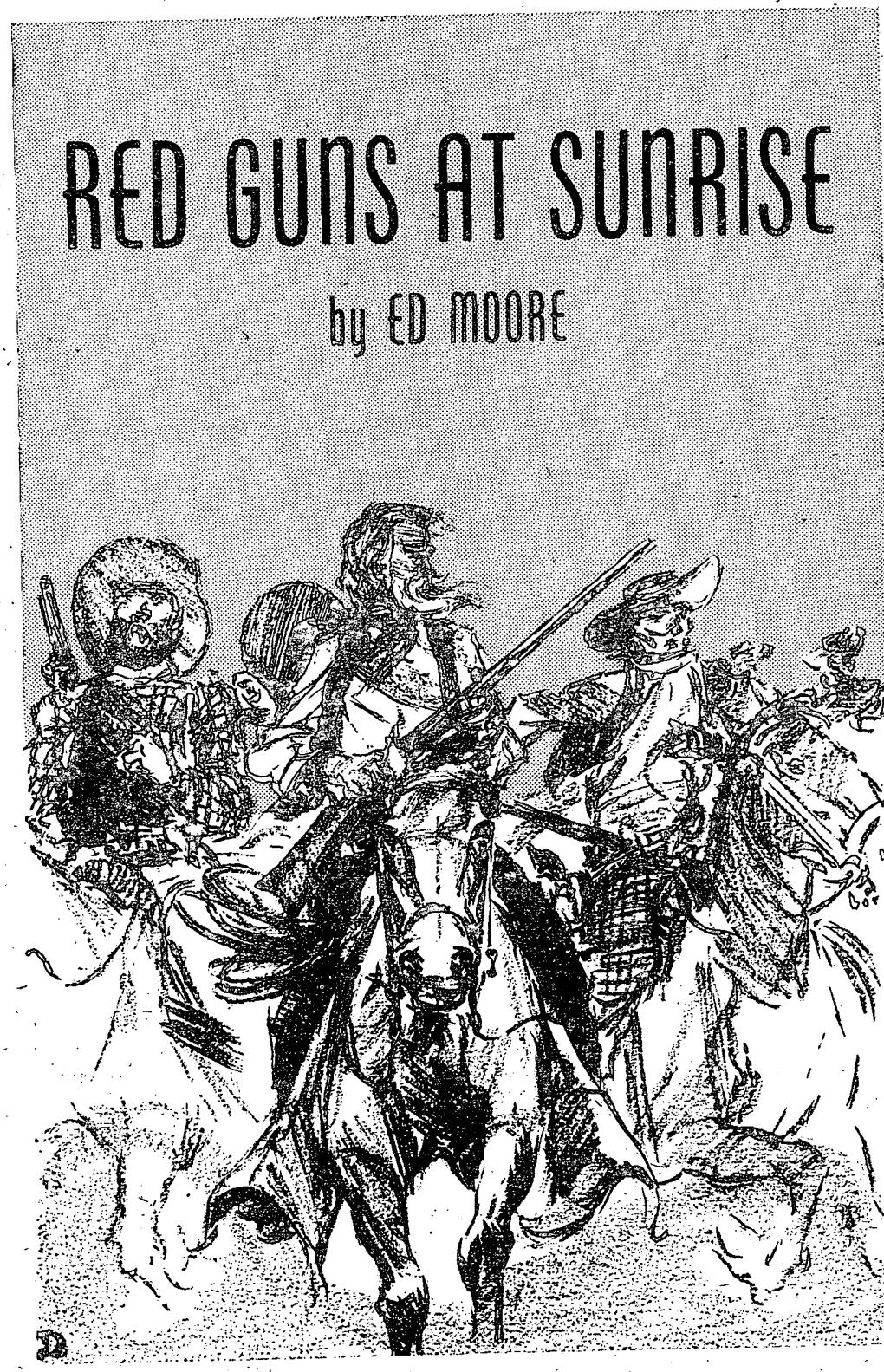
# RED GUNS AT SUNRISE

by ED MOORE



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# RED GUNS AT SUNRISE

***Men died in the early gray light of day—and in the midst of the fighting hordes roved a red giant of death!***

## By Ed Moore

### CHAPTER I.

CURSE OF SUNRISE VALLEY.

WORD SWIFTLY traveled up and down the main street of Sunrise—it passed into the barber shop and into Miller's Mercantile, across the street into the Golden Horn Saloon, and on to Spencer's Livery at the edge of town. In its wake a sullen anger seemed to settle over the town. Men hitched their gun belts forward and spoke in taut undertones. They drifted from the buildings to the boardwalk on both sides of the street and gathered in little bunches. An ominous silence settled as the men looked up Sunrise Valley—and hate was in their eyes.

The Renfros were riding down out of the mountains!

Among all the valley people, Frank Winston was the only one who showed no concern. He looked mildly toward the oncoming cavalcade, leaned carelessly against the hitch rack in front of the Golden Horn, and rolled a cigarette. He had just touched a match to it when Mace Shattuck strode up and braced back on his thick legs before him.

"Well, Winston," Shattuck said scornfully, "looks like yore friends are comin' down out of the mountains."

"Anything strange about that?" Frank asked indifferently. "They come every once in a while for supplies."

"Maybe they won't be comin' much longer," Shattuck said arrogantly.

"Yeah? You gonna stop 'em, Mace?"

"It ain't just me. It's all us valley people. We're fed up—"

"Since when," Frank interrupted with fine-edged sarcasm, "did you become one of the valley people? Shore, you live here. You've got a strangle hold on the whole valley. But it'll take more than you've got to make you into a valley man."

"You've got guts to talk!" Shattuck said angrily. "What about you? If there's trouble with the Renfros, which side are you on?"

From all sides men had edged closer to the two. The enmity between Frank Winston and Mace Shattuck had long been building toward trouble. Frank knew the men carefully awaited his answer to Shattuck's question. Not that they backed Mace Shattuck—they hated and feared him. But Frank, himself a valley rancher, was under suspicion. That knowledge lashed Frank into a temper; his eyes hardened and his lips thinned. He studied the arrogant figure before him and drawled: "There won't be trouble with the Renfros, Shattuck, unless it's started by some of yore stripe!"

"Hedgin', ain't you, Winston?" Shattuck said contemptuously.

Frank pushed away from the hitch

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rack and stepped close to Shattuck. In a low voice he said: "You may have the wool pulled over the other ranchers' eyes, but I'm onto you, Shattuck. I'm onto yore whole crooked set-up and you know it. Well, any time you want trouble with me you can get it! And you won't have to drag the Renfros in."

Shattuck's eyes narrowed and under his breath he said, "Yore time's just about up, Winston!" Then for the benefit of the onlookers he laughed scornfully and said in a loud voice: "I figured you'd take the side of the Renfros. Now we know where you stand, Winston." He threw a knowing look at the valley men and stomped into the saloon, which he owned along with everything else in Sunrise.

Frank felt the condemning eyes of the valley men boring into him and flung his cigarette away in irritation. Then he glanced up to see the Renfros sweep over a hill a half mile away, and for the moment forgot everything else.

It was something to see that clan ride. Years ago they had migrated from the South and settled in the Rideaway Mountains. They were a silent, proud people who made good friends and bad enemies. And they loved and hated as a unit. As they swept down toward Sunrise old Abel Renfro, head of the clan, was in the lead. His great growth of whiskers streamed in the wind, for, despite his seventy years, he could ride with any man. His gaunt shoulders were straight and his eagle eyes scanned every rock and bush.

Behind Abel sped a buckboard drawn by a galloping pair of magnificent blacks. Winston knew a girl would be snapping the reins on those blacks. Lucy Renfro was the only woman who ever left the mountains these turbulent days and that for a reason: every man had to be free to handle a gun.

And all around the buckboard rode the Renfro men; tall, rangy men with long black hair and piercing eyes; superb horsemen mounted on splendid animals; dangerous fighters and deadly shots with their long-barreled rifles.

The voices of two elderly cattlemen, John Washburn and Earl Chadwick, lifted behind Frank. They were leaders in the valley, and by completely ignoring Frank's presence they were conveying to him the hostility of the valley people.

"Damn them Renfros!" Washburn swore. "We oughta get all the valley people together and wipe 'em out!"

"It's too late now," Chadwick grunted. "We'd oughta done it three years ago, before they rustled us clean. Now we ain't got the guns and we ain't got the money to hire 'em."

"Mace Shattuck has. He's got a crew big enough to do it alone."

"Yeah, but damn his penny-pinchin' soul, he ain't gonna risk nothin' in a fight with them Renfro hellions."

"Still," Washburn said thinly, "Mace is right when he says we ought to clean up the valley first. Then damn Renfros always know when the time's right to run off a herd. Ain't but one rancher in the valley ain't been ruined! And ain't but one valley man allowed to go into the mountains!"

The remark was too blunt to let pass. Frank swung around on his heel, blood darkening his face as he sought to hold his anger in check.

"John," he drawled softly, "ain't another man alive could talk that way and keep on livin'! You were a friend of my father's so I can't hardly kill you."

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"Why, you young pup—"

"Shut up!" Frank snapped. The hurt caused by the suspicions of his own people suddenly drove his temper beyond control. He said cruelly: "Mace Shattuck ain't just got a mortgage on this whole valley; he's got a mortgage on yore damn souls and minds. He tells you what to believe, and you believe it!"

"He loaned us money when the rustlin' ruined us," Chadwick said sullenly.

"Yeah," Frank snapped. "Shattuck shows up here and rustlin' starts. He says people you've lived with in peace for years, people you've visited with and who've visited with you—he says those people are the rustlers and you believe him. The rustlin' gets you in a hole and he loans you money till he owns you, body and soul. Add it up!"

"We've trailed herds into the mountains!" Washburn bridled angrily.

"You've never traced 'em to the Renfros!"

"Ain't nowhere else they could go! But you're one valley man has kept in the clear! What's kept yore cattle from bein' stole—"

"These!" Frank whipped out and with strong, lean fingers tapped the guns at his thighs.

"Everybody ain't a damned gunman!" Washburn roared.

The thing was in the open now and unbridled tempers had carried it beyond recall. Frank said softly: "The next man has things to say about me had better be a damned gunman. Pass the word along." He turned his back then and rolled a cigarette as the Renfro clan swept into town.

They surged down the main street to Miller's Mercantile and stopped in a whirling cloud of dust. The buckboard was close to the steps, and Lucy sat straight and proud as she held the blacks in. Old Abel stayed in the saddle, his eyes searching the little bunches of hard-faced, sullen valley people. The other men dismounted and most of them bunched loosely around the buckboard. A half dozen went into the store to buy the staples the clan itself didn't produce. The air was electric with tension.

Frank threw down his cigarette and sauntered across the street. Resentment stung him as his eyes traveled up and down the boardwalk and caught the glaring sneers of the valley men. Then his eyes swung ahead to be shocked by the fact that Renfros stood ringed about the buckboard shoulder to shoulder. Frank paused and nodded to the men, each of whom he knew by name. His gesture was met with implacable steadiness and no sign of recognition. Frowning, Frank started to shove by to speak to Lucy and was blocked by a barrier of hard-muscled shoulders.

Low laughter swept up and down the boardwalks and grew into loud guffaws. Frank flushed and looked up at Lucy. She sat stiffly on the seat with eyes straight ahead, but heightened color showed that she knew what was happening. Frank looked again at the silent, implacable men and anger lashed him.

A year ago the Renfros had been leaving town when gun trouble broke. The closely bunched riders had swung up their long rifles and spread fast to break an ambush of valley men. The wagon team had spooked and run away down the dangerous Rideaway Creek trail. Frank had been going home and had spurred his horse after the careening wagon and lifted Lucy Renfro from the seat just before the wagon

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*As if by signal a lane opened to the buckboard.*

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smashed to bits against a jagged boulder.

Nothing had been said when the tight-lipped Renfro men rode up, but they had silently acknowledged a debt, and Frank had ridden home with them—the first valley man to ride into the mountains in years. After that he had returned often. He liked the mountain people, and they liked him—and there was Lucy.

And now the Renfros were treating him as though he were a mangy sheepherder. Humiliated and angry, Frank swung around, and a few long strides carried him to where old Abel sat his saddle.

Through stiff lips Frank said: "What's the meanin' of this, Abel?"

The old man looked at him with troubled eyes. "Frank," he said courteously, "you've been visitin' us a long time now." He paused, then added, "Lucy's the reason."

"Mostly," Frank answered tightly. "Well?"

"I'd oughta stopped it before it went so far," Abel said. "Lucy's more my daughter than niece. I raised her and I got to look after her."

"What are yore objections to me?"

"None, personal. But, with the way things is, the valley and mountain people can't marry. No good would come of it."

"That's mine and Lucy's business!"

"It ain't. It's the Renfros' business. Frank"—the old man's voice was less harsh—"the mountain canyons is full of our cows and there's more'n graze enough. We'd be proud to have you come live with us."

"My ranch is in the valley. If I left it I wouldn't have anything to offer Lucy."

"I'd be proud to give you a start—"

"No!" Frank snapped.

"I knowed it would be that way," Abel nodded. "I'm sorry, boy. It's the girl I'm thinkin' of."

"Now that I'm kicked out," Frank drawled dangerously, "I'd like a word with Lucy."

Abel regarded him a moment and said, "All right."

As if by a signal a lane opened to the buckboard. Hard-eyed and grim, Frank thrust his way forward. His features didn't relax as he looked up into the cleanly molded face of Lucy Renfro.

"Lucy," he said, "what's back of this?"

"No more than Abel said," she answered quietly. "He doesn't think it could work with things the way they are."

"What do you think?"

"I think it could."

"Then get down off that wagon and come with me!"

"Your temper's out of hand, Frank. You might kill several of the Renfros, but you know you'd be killed."

"All right. Then meet me somewhere."

Again Lucy shook her head, and she put a quieting hand on Frank's arm. "That wouldn't work, either. They'd only kill you and take me back."

"Then," Frank said with bitterness edging his voice, "you want me to take this lyin' down—"

"I want you to wait, Frank," she answered and a slow smile curved her lips. "I've known this was coming and I've prepared for it. There's just one way it can be straightened out and I—"

"Load the wagon!" old Abel bellowed, and men sprang to the porch to snatch up sacks and barrels being passed out and heave them to the buckboard. Frank was crowded

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back. Over the noise he heard Lucy say, "You've got to be patient, Frank. There's a way—"

Then the men leaped to saddle, the buckboard spun about, and, with long rifles pointing ominously up and down the boardwalks, the Renfro clan lifted their horses to full gallop and swept onward toward the Rideaway Mountains.

Again taunting laughter ran up and down the boardwalks, then the little groups of men broke up and Frank was alone in the street. For a long time he stood with bent head while the situation fully developed in his mind. His own people already thought he was hooked up with the Renfros in a wholesale rustling set-up, and now the Renfros had told him to stay out of the mountains! He was caught square in the counter-currents of hate and suspicion. The injustice of it turned his mood black and reckless.

Frank shrugged his wide, sloping shoulders and with long strides walked toward the Golden Horn. The bar was lined with ranchers when he entered. The light hum of conversation broke off, then was resumed in insinuating undertones interspersed with mocking laughter. Frank picked up a bottle and angrily carried it to a table to sit alone.

The whole Sunrise Valley war might never have come off if Mace Shattuck hadn't chosen that moment to give expression to his arrogant meanness. Shattuck winked at the men scattered along the bar and sauntered over to Frank's table.

"Figure you're too good to drink with valley men, Winston?" Shattuck asked loudly.

Frank looked up slowly and a sudden sense of danger warned him! Shattuck had finally decided he knew too much and was forcing a showdown. But Frank knew the man was too crafty to buck his guns alone. This was a trap!

"And now," Shattuck went on tauntingly, "the Renfros are too good for you. Anybody would take what you did from them damn—"

"All right, Mace," Frank said bleakly. He got slowly to his feet and kicked the chair from behind him. A humorless smile quirked his lips are he regarded the big, powerfully-built man before him. Then he went on in that quiet drawl: "You've been huntin' trouble with me for a long time, Mace. Well, you've found it, you double-crossin', thievin' skunk!"

The arrogance momentarily left Shattuck's face as his eyes flicked to one side and beyond Frank, then it returned in a leering grin of satisfaction.

"You're askin' for it, Winston—"

"No dice," Frank broke in thinly. "Call yore two gun hands off my back first!"

"Damn yore guts!" Shattuck blustered. "You think I need help—"

"Never mind what I think! Even these sheep-eyed ranchers can't hardly let you get away with murder. Get them two guns around where I can see 'em!"

For a long moment the situation hung on a hair. It was then the stranger took chips. No one had seen him come in, which was unbelievable, for he was a giant of a man. A red beard covered his face and saggy red hair fell from beneath his battered hat. Queer, devilish lights danced in his eyes and his wide mouth wore an habitual grin of sardonic amusement.

"Never mind yore back, feller," the big man boomed. "I'll watch 'em fer you!"

Every eye jumped to the giant. He stood grinning and twirling a six-gun as though it were a toothpick.

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Frank's eyes met his, locked, and an intangible bond sprang up between them.

"Thanks, mister," Frank drawled. "Keep yore eye on them skunks behind me. And I'd rather take Mace with my hands than shoot him! Turn yore gun a little, mister, till he drops his gun belt."

Shattuck snarled in his throat because his plans hadn't come off, but he knew he was no longer dealing. Still he was big and powerful, and this was better than matching guns with Winston alone. He jerked off his gun belt and Prince Albert, and bored in.

Frank was driven by a cold rage against an implacable fate. Mace Shattuck seemed to represent the sum of all his troubles and Frank's fury almost played him false. He met the bigger man head on and was battered and mauled for a full three minutes before Shattuck's clubbing fists smashed sense into him. Then cold reason gained control and Frank began to fight craftily.

He gave ground before the superior weight, but as he backed up his long arms slashed wickedly into Shattuck's face! Shattuck was unconscious of the shift in tactics and took the lashing blows to get in close. A looping right smashed his nose all over his face, and with a wild roar Mace leaped in and flung his powerful arms about his squirming, shifting opponent. They crashed to the floor, but even as they went down, Frank brought up jolting uppercuts and jerked his knees to fend off Shattuck's vicious kicks.

Across the floor they rolled and twisted, a writhing mass of bone-crushing fury! The ranchers watched with breathless attention, and it was strange that silence held them in such tight grip. But the red giant twirled his six-gun and bellowed and

laughed for the sheer love of battle. One of Shattuck's men must have thought he had grown careless, for he started to slip a gun from its holster. The stranger's gun leveled, barked, and the Shattuck man cursed viciously as he wrung a mangled hand!

Frank threw Shattuck off, twisted out of his grasp, and lunged to his feet. As Shattuck came up, Frank ripped his face to shreds with slashing blows. Shattuck went down, and, as he came up again, he had a chair in his hand! Frank leaped inside the crushing weight, took it

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over his shoulder, and pounded Shattuck with both hands. Mace staggered back against the bar. He knew he was almost through and hate drove him to frenzy!

He snatched a bottle off the bar and weaved forward! The giant stranger's gun spoke again and the bottle exploded. But Mace was left with a jagged, deadly sliver attached to the neck in his hand! With murder in his heart, he lunged, and Frank, dodging back, tripped over the splintered chair and went down! Mace dived—but Frank met him with his boots.

The red giant moved forward but Frank growled savagely, "Keep out of it!"

Frank reached for the chair and swung it as Shattuck leaped in again! A paralyzing blow across the arm spun the glass dagger out of his hand. Then Frank swarmed all over him, smashing, clubbing, ripping until Shattuck was a reeling, bloody, blind man. When he was sickened by the bloody mess, Frank stepped in and a terrible right crashed Shattuck against the wall from where he slid to the floor and lay still.

A gusty sigh went up from the onlookers. The ruthless master of Sunrise Valley wasn't dead, so they didn't dare cheer, but every man in the place was smiling. Then Frank's hot glance slid over their faces, and when they realized who it was that had turned the trick, they ceased to smile. They turned their backs and picked up their neglected glasses off the bar.

"Give the dirty son the boots!" the giant roared. "Stomp his guts out!"

Frank looked up narrowly, shook his head slightly as he buckled on his guns, then left the saloon. He walked to the livery barn, called to the hostler to saddle his horse, and went to the watering trough to wash the blood off his torn face and skinned knuckles. He got some satisfaction out of the beating he'd given Shattuck, but it really hadn't accomplished anything. And from now on his life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime. Shattuck was powerful and ruthless, and he kept a full stable of hired gun hands.

Frank was drying his face on his undershirt when he looked up to see the red giant leaning against the fence. Fiendish lights glinted in his eyes, and he was silently laughing.

"Thanks for steppin' in, mister," Frank said in sudden irritation. "But what's so damned funny?"

"You're sort of caught in a jackpot, ain't you?" the stranger said, his laughter breaking into rumbling sound. "Whyn't you stomp his guts out?"

As he had at first, Frank felt the force in the big man—a primitive force saved from cruelty only by a vast, contemptuous humor. Nevertheless, Frank was drawn to the stranger, and his irritation passed.

He said, "Maybe you would've given him the boots—"

"Me? Hell, yes, I would!"

"Well, I couldn't."

"You're too damned finicky. You know Shattuck's gonna nail yore hide to a fence!"

Frank nodded, "If he can—"

"He can!" a voice barked from the barn and six of Shattuck's gun hands stepped into view with drawn guns.

## CHAPTER II.

### BUSHWHACKED!

AFTER that is was too fast to follow! In the face of those drawn weapons, Frank Winston and the giant stranger slashed for their guns. Gun masters they were, and their sixes were flaming as quickly as those

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already drawn! As he triggered, the red giant lunged sideways to a knee, and like flashing light, Frank dived to an end of the water trough and already lead was screaming and bucking guns were spouting flame!

The six hired guns had made a mistake in thinking they had the drop and two were already writhing on the ground before the other four dived back into the barn.

"Yore hoss inside?" the giant roared as he blasted the side door full of scorching lead.

"Yeah," Frank whipped out. As he thumbed his hammers, he saw other men leave the Golden Horn on the run! "We've got to blast 'em out of the barn in a hurry! It'll be too hot to handle in a minute!"

While the stranger continued to throw lead, Frank jammed fresh cartridges into his guns, then he took over while the stranger reloaded. In the dark recesses of the barn the four gunmen had evidently found protection, for slugs began to whine out the door.

"Let's go!" the giant roared and his eyes glinted wickedly.

He and Frank laid down a withering barrage of lead and behind it sped for the door. Before that mad charge the hired gunmen broke from cover, and two more of them went down. The other two made the front entrance as a horde of men swept up to join the battle.

"Hit the saddle!" Frank shouted. "Out the back door!"

He was astride his own long-legged mount as he heard men outside shouting and spreading around the barn. The stranger leaped upon a horse that was as much of a giant as he was—and spurred him straight for the front entrance! Cursing the man's madness, Frank kicked his own horse in the same direction. And the surprise worked! Shattuck's men outside were expecting a break from the rear and the sudden appearance at the front of the two hard-riding, fast-shooting gun devils drove them to cover!

In another minute Frank and the stranger were pounding out of town. Frank looked around to see Shattuck's men milling in confusion, not knowing whether to take to their horses or to wait for orders from their boss.

When Frank straightened around, the stranger had pulled off the trail and was spurring his horse toward a spur of the Rideaways. He carelessly lifted a hand, and above the drumming hoofs Frank heard roaring laughter and snatches of a ribald song.

Frank rode hard all the way to his ranch. He wondered about the red-bearded man who had given him a hand, but soon forgot him as he faced more pressing problems. The trap Mace Shattuck had tried to spring in the saloon and the speed with which he'd set his hired guns on the trail showed that Mace was set to kill or drive Frank out of the valley in a hurry. Shattuck couldn't afford to take chances with a man who knew too much. Frank did *know* something, but he couldn't prove it! His taunting of Shattuck had been little more than bluff. Time and again he'd tried to get proof enough to pin the rustling on Shattuck, but had never been able even to find out how it was done. Some clever ruse was being worked that defied every effort to run it down.

But Frank knew he couldn't buck Shattuck's crowd alone. His only chance to live now depended on his getting proof—proof that would convince the stubborn ranchers that Shattuck was crooked as well as grasping. Then a way would have to be found to unite the ranchers

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with the mountain people so that Mace Shattuck's gun empire could be smashed!

It was a monumental task, but Frank took one step at a time. The first thing he had to have was proof. He had to have it and he had to have it fast! At his ranch he told his foreman he would be gone for several days. Then he quickly got a bedroll, packed grub, and caught up a fresh horse. Still he was not quick enough!

Sheriff King and a deputy rode up just as Frank climbed into the saddle. The lawmen stopped in front of him and Frank waited for what he knew was coming.

"You're under arrest, Winston!" the sheriff announced.

"For what? Protectin' myself when a pack of gun wolves jump me?"

"If that's the way it was, you'll have yore chance in court. There's some say it happened another way."

"Yeah. There'll be a lot of 'em. Like you, they all jump when Shattuck yips."

"Are you comin' along?"

"What do you think?" Frank's lip curled. "And tell Shattuck when he wants me he'll have to send more than two scared tin badges!"

"I came to see if you'd come peaceable," the sheriff said darkly. "Ain't no use in maybe gettin' my man killed. I'll deputize several men and be back."

"Bring a posse," Frank said wickedly. "Now get the hell off my place! The stench of Shattuck hired men turns my stomach!"

The lawmen glared, then wheeled their horses. Frank watched them go and knew that forces were closing in on him. Shattuck was organizing every agency in the country against him now. Probably a reward would be placed on his head so he would be fair game for any bushwhacker with a gun. His only out was to get Shattuck before Shattuck got him!

Frank turned his horse toward the Rideaways. Stolen herds had been traced into the foothills many times but had always been lost in a small lake. Tracks leaving the lake had never been found. But Frank headed for the lake because somehow it had to be the key to the whole set-up.

Night overtook him just as he entered the foothills. He made a dry camp and soon rolled in his blanket. Dawn was barely coloring the east when he was awakened by a bull-like voice bellowing a song. Frank was pulling on his boots when the red giant of the day before cantered around a bend of the canyon on his great horse. At sight of Frank a wide grin split the stranger's face.

"Oughta be careful where you bed down," he bellowed. "You might git a hoof stuck in yore mouth."

"I'm just accused of stealin' cows," Frank said dryly, "not swallowin' horses."

"You wouldn't jest happen to be on yore way to see if you can find out where them stolen cows go to?"

"I might just happen to be."

"Close-mouthed, ain't you?" the stranger grinned, satanic lights glowing in his eyes. "Well, I'll tell you somethin' 'thout yore askin'. I'm goin' along with you."

Frank found himself grinning. "Maybe it ain't none of my business," he said, "but just who the hell are you?"

"Ever hear of Red Ramsey?"

"Roarin' Red Ramsey? You?"

"I reckon."

Frank carelessly rolled a cigarette. Roaring Red Ramsey was almost a legendary figure in the Southwest, an outlaw of wide notoriety, a hero



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of prodigious feats of strength and gun mastery. It was said he was an outlaw for sheer love of the dangerous life it bred.

"Just one more thing," Frank said. "You're sort of showin' uncommon interest in my business."

"Maybe I like you," Red snorted. "Maybe I don't like that Shattuck hombre. Maybe it ain't none of yore damn business!"

"Maybe I'll take you along," Frank grinned. "Let's get goin'."

He saddled and they headed deeper into the mountains, at a northeast angle from the Renfro holdings. After a two-hour ride they came to the lake. Frank had explained how sign had always run out there. He started circling one way while Roaring Red went the other, but when they met on the far side neither had picked up a thing.

"Yeah," Frank said curtly, "that's the way it's always been." His eyes narrowed as they traveled back across the lake. "Well, them cows shore as hell go into the water and they ain't got wings. I'm goin' back and go in, too!"

"Ain't no sense in gettin' wet," Red growled.

"Maybe not. But I'm already in hot water. Might as well get wet."

They returned to the far bank of the lake and, with Red grumbling and swearing, put their horses into the water. It was shallow a good distance from shore, and the floor of the lake slanted to the right. The horses veered that way, and, just as it became necessary for them to swim, Frank's searching eyes focused on a bulging overhang of rock.

"Look yonder!" he grunted and guided his horse in that direction. As they got closer an opening appeared down close to the water level. It developed into the mouth of a great cavern completely screened by the overhang of rock from the bank. In a couple of minutes the horses clambered up to the floor of the cavern.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Red swore. "This used to be the bed of an underground stream. Wonder where she goes?"

"That," Frank said shortly, "is what I'm gonna find out."

Red looked into the yawning darkness of the cavern and growled, "I shore don't like to stick my head into somethin' where I can't even see."

"I'm goin' in," Frank said. "Stay here if you want to."

"Did I say I warn't goin'?" Red bridled. "Just the same I never seen a better place for a bushwhackin'!"

Frank led off walking, and in a moment they were in complete darkness. The floor of the cavern appeared to be smooth, but what lay hidden in its dark recesses there was no knowing. Frank cautiously felt his way along and finally pushed his horse ahead of him to lead. The uncertainty and possible dangers that the blackness concealed drew his nerves to a fine edge and he gripped his gun butt tightly. Red, too, was feeling the strain of the blind walk, for he began to swear in a rumbling undertone. The cavern seemed to go on forever.

Suddenly Frank's horse snorted and jumped forward. Frank swore and lunged after him. He crashed through a screen of bushes into broad daylight. Red's horse almost rode him down and the giant outlaw leaped into sight.

Then a rifle cut loose! With the first shot Frank made a running jump for his saddle, and as he landed he saw Red spin and hit the ground. Frank dug in the spurs and his horse leaped forward into a broad valley swarming with cows! It was also

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swarming with lead! Three horsemen bore down upon him at full gallop, shooting fast as they came!

Frank chopped a couple of swift shots and swerved his horse up the valley. The three riders split and rode at him from different angles. They were closing in fast! A small canyon mouth showed and Frank kicked his horse into it. That was a mistake. In a minute he saw it was a box canyon guarded by sheer walls! He left the saddle and hit the ground, but there was not a vestige of cover. He crouched and triggered his guns swiftly, but the riders came from different angles, riding low over their horses' necks for protection. Frank's blistering lead slowed them, but he knew he hadn't a chance!

And then it seemed a red avalanche struck the riders from the rear! Roaring Red swept into the canyon yelling blistering oaths and thumbing both his guns! Frank leaped to the saddle again and charged. The three horsemen were caught in the middle of hell! Red blasted one out of the saddle just as Frank cut another down, and the third went down under both their guns.

"What the hell was the idea?" Frank yelled as Red rode up. "I thought you was hit!"

"A man in my business," Red grinned as he loaded his guns, "has to use tricks."

"Damn such business!" Frank snapped. But he knew he had never been sided by a better man in a tight. "Let's go look at them cows. And there might be more of these hombres. I reckon we've found Shattuck's layout."

Apparently there weren't any more men in the valley. There was, however, a tremendous herd of cattle. The valley was lush with grass and bounded on three sides by impenetrable cliffs. The underground river bed had tunneled completely through a mountain! They rode around the herd to find that the cows wore every brand in Sunrise Valley. And then Frank saw something else!

"See that big steer yonder?" he pointed. "That's Old Blue, smartest lead steer ever lived. He b'longed to Shattuck, but three years ago Mace gave out word he was dead. By God, that's how the rustlin's been done!

"Old Blue was taught that this was home. Mace naturally knows the location of every herd in the valley. He would have Old Blue brought in and mix him with a herd he wanted to steal. By God, Mace might even been settin' with the rancher while Old Blue was leadin' his herd off to that lake and onto here!"

"Smart," Red grunted, stroking his beard. "Shattuck must hold this herd and sell cows a few at a time. Well, all you got to do now is bring the ranchers in here, show 'em Blue is still alive and explain the set-up, and that'll bust Shattuck high, wide and handsome."

It was not as simple as that, Frank thought bitterly. The ranchers would fight all right, but to what purpose? Mace Shattuck had too powerful a crew of paid gunmen. The ranchers were not strong enough now to tackle Shattuck alone. It would take the ranchers and the Renfros together to smash that gun empire. And Frank, hated and hunted by the valley people and kicked out by the mountain people—it was up to Frank to untie them against their common enemy! In short, clipped words he told as much to Roaring Red.

"It can't be done," Red said. He

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looked at Frank and grinned. "From what I hear old Abel ain't got much use for you valley ranchers."

"Can't blame him none," Frank said shortly. "But hell is gonna break one of these days! This trouble's got to end before that day comes."

"Then you better think hard."

"I've done thought. Red, me and you are gonna turn rustlers!"

"Me? Hell, I'd ruther rob a bank than—"

"We're gonna rustle a Renfro herd out of the mountains. Then we'll mix 'em with these valley cows and it'll look like Shattuck's workin' both sides of the fence. I oughta be able to get Abel and the ranchers together then!"

Roaring Red burst into uproarous laughter.

"That'd be a helluva joke on Abel," he thundered. "Boy, we'll do it! We'll mix Old Blue with Abel's cows and let the big ox run 'em off!"

It was after dark when they penetrated Renfro country, driving the big lead steer ahead of them. Frank's eyes searched every shadow and rock, for, if the Renfros caught them in here, guns would ask the only questions. But Roaring Red rode along humming and chuckling to himself until Frank's patience wore thin under the strain. He headed for a canyon where he knew a herd was usually bedded down and when they reached the entrance to it Frank stopped.

"Stay here, Red," he said softly. "I'll take Blue in and rouse the cattle. Keep a sharp lookout!"

Quietly as possible Frank hazed the steer down into the canyon. He had just reached the floor when to his right a horseshoe rang on a rock! Hard on top of that a horseman sprang out of the shadows! Frank's hand streaked to his gun and he was leveling down when a guarded voice said, "That you, Buck?"

Frank held his breath a moment. Then, with gun ready, answered cautiously, "Yeah."

"That's Old Blue you're hazin', I reckon?"

"Yeah."

"Well, take him to the other side of the herd and drive him in. Mace sent a dozen of the boys on this job.

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Once the herd starts movin' we're to let Blue take it on while we stay back in case any Renfros get roused up."

"Mace ain't seemin' to care if a fight starts," Frank muttered guardedly.

"He hopes it will, but we're to get out of it soon as the herd is in the clear. Mace figgers the Renfros will blame the valley ranchers for this and hell will blow the lid off. That Winston hombre must have the low-down because Mace is ready for the Renfros and ranchers to kill one another off. When it's over Mace will own the whole works."

"Not bad. Well, I'll get goin'."

Frank skirted the rider and drove Blue on. So Shattuck was set to hurl the mountain and valley people at one another's throats! It was a ruthlessly clever scheme and would work—if Frank alone couldn't stop it! Well, he wanted Shattuck's men to steal the herd. After that he'd have to move fast to catch Shattuck in his own trap! The whole future of the valley and mountain people depended on it!

Frank rode around several horsemen who grunted guarded greetings, then got to the far side of the herd and turned Blue back. Immediately riders rode in and roused the herd. Let alone, Old Blue tossed his head and started back for his home range at a lumbering trot and the herd strung out behind to follow. Riders began to drift in behind the cattle. Frank stayed as far away from them as possible, intending to pick up Red at the canyon neck and then slip off into the night. But, as the herd passed through the neck, the narrow going forced the men to bunch.

And then hell did break! From both sides of the narrow entrance guns flamed and above the bursting thunder rode a fierce terrible yell! The battle cry of the Renfros! The Shattuck men jerked and spurred their horses, trying to break out of the jam. Frightened curses tore from their throats as they snatched their guns and tried to fight clear of the withering cross-fire!

Frank was on the outside of the jam and jumped his horse in a frantic effort to get back down into the canyon. He couldn't even use his guns against the men who were blasting the night into hideous hell! Then a mighty blow smashed across his temple and he didn't even know when he crashed out of the saddle!

## CHAPTER III.

### THE CLANS RIDE!

IT was daylight when Frank came around. His head was bursting, but he knew that he was in a bunk. He opened his eyes to look into the fierce, forbidding features of old Abel Renfro. So they'd found him and brought him to their headquarters!

"Just a crease," Abel nodded sourly. "You'll be able to ride tomorrow. I wouldn't thought you'd done it, Frank."

"Done what?"

"Hell!" Abel snorted. "You hooked up with Mace Shattuck to steal our cows because you was sore, didn't you?"

"It wouldn't do much good for me to deny it, would it?" Frank blazed angrily.

"None whatever. Them was Shattuck men with you. Well, we gunned 'em down to the last man. But while we was fightin' the herd got away somehow and we couldn't find it. Ain't nobody gonna steal Renfro cows. Tomorrow we're gonna blast Sunrise Valley from end to end!"

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"Listen, Abel, the valley ranchers ain't in on—"

"Oh, yore neck'll be saved," the old man said with biting sarcasm. "You saved a Renfro's life oncet, so come mornin' you'll be give a horse. That'll square the debt, but, if you ever show yore face in this country again, you'll be gunned on sight."

Frank cursed under his breath. The hounds of hate were loose and there was nothing he could do to prevent the carnage which would reduce the country to a bloody shambles. One man would profit from the wreckage—Mace Shattuck. Protected by his gunmen, he would survive to rule the valley and the mountains!

At that moment the door of the cabin jerked open and in the doorway stood Roaring Red Ramsey! Frank's muscles tightened and his eyes whipped to Abel. But the old man showed nothing but irritation!

"Damn heathen," Abel growled. "Warn't you taught to knock 'fore you busted into a room?"

"You know I'm some forgetful, Abel," Red grinned insolently. "If you warn't so old maybe you could teach me manners."

"I ain't too old to whup hell out o' you!" Abel spat. "Only Renfro ever lived that blackened the name!"

Frank jerked upright. Roaring Red Ramsey was a Renfro! He must have set the trap of the night before!

"Abel," Red said, "git out and let me talk fatherly to this misguided bucko. Looks like he's ready to bust 'bout somethin'!"

"Talk all you want," Abel replied. "But don't let him leave the cabin!"

When the old man had gone, Frank said bleakly, "Gimme a gun, Red, and I'll shoot it out with you, damn you!"

"Don't git proddy with me," Red grinned. "I can't help bein' a Renfro, though I jest use my fust name so's to hide the fack. My brother, Abel, is sort of strait-laced, ain't he? Even if I am red all over, the Renfros tally me as a black sheep. Well, I didn't tip 'em off last night—they got on to the rustlin' theyselves and warn't nothin' I could do."

"And now war's gonna break and ain't nothin' I can do!" Frank grated.

"Hell," Red snorted, "they's gonna be peace if I have to kill every man in the valley and mountains myself personal. Wouldn't be much loss if I did, only Lucy mightn't like it, so I ain't agonna."

"Lucy?" Frank said. "She—"

"Hell, she's my niece, ain't she? I reckon I care more 'bout that gal than everybody else put together. She writ me recent to come straighten out this mess. Seems like she wants you so she's gonna git you! I don't know what she wants you fer, only you shore can handle them cutters. Quicker this trouble twixt the mountains and valley gits straightened out, quicker you uns can git married and I can git gone. I was two States away and havin' a hell of a big time with the biggest posse I ever seen when—"

"Shut up, you damned big chunk of hell," Frank said. But he grinned. There might yet be time—

"You ain't got a thing to do but nurse yore busted head," Red said as soberly as his wicked humor would let him. "Tonight I'm gonna git you out o' here. It'll be up to you to git the ranchers together. Have 'em meet at yore ranch. I'll see that the Renfros come there, too. Then it'll be up to you to do a job o' talkin'." The big man threw back his head and roared. "I'm shore gonna play a joke on Abel. He'll be fit to shoot me!"

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"There's just one thing," Frank said. "We'll have to show the ranchers proof that Shattuck's been doin' the rustlin!"

"Think I'm a amachoor?" Red bridled. "There'll be proof!" But he would say no more.

Frank spent a tense, nervous day. He didn't know what Roaring Red was up to and the uncertainty was galling. If there was a slip nothing could save the country! But night finally came and Red had arranged to bring Frank his supper. He also brought his guns and full cartridge belts. The giant outlaw was grinning with good humor but still he wouldn't talk. After Frank had eaten, Red slipped him out of the cabin and down into a ravine where his horse stood saddled.

"Git gone," Red said. "Wait at yore ranch. Hell's a-b'ilin' and 'bout to spill over!"

Frank rode quietly away from the Renfro headquarters, then lifted his horse to a gallop and pounded out of the mountains. He put his horse across the range in a bee line for John Washburn's ranch and dug in the spurs. The animal was staggering badly when Frank quit the saddle at a run and lunged across the porch of the ranchhouse.

The door flew open and the old rancher shaded his eyes. "Who's there?" he barked.

"Winston!"

Frank shoved through the door and Washburn's first surprise gave way to rising anger.

"You've got yore guts to come here!" he said savagely. "You showed yore stripe when you quit the country on account of Mace had proof you was tied in with the Renfros on this—"

"That what Mace gave out? What was the proof?"

"Hell, I don't know. But Mace's got it. And there's a price on yore scalp. By God, if I hadn't unstrapped my guns—"

"You're a hard-headed old fool, John!" Frank said savagely. "Shattuck has played you all for suckers like I've told you right along. Only now *I've* got proof! I'm just askin' one thing. Will you pass the word to all the ranchers and have 'em meet at my place?"

"What in hell for?"

"To save yore stubborn necks! Do you think I'd meet you there with a price on my head if I didn't have somethin'?"

That sounded reasonable, but it was hard for Washburn to let go of his suspicions. Frank drove home his final point.

"I've got help on this. A man's comin' out of the mountains to help make the play stick. We know where a lot of yore cows are, John, yores and plenty more!"

"My cows!" Washburn blazed.

"Yeah. And, when I get through, you'll wanta carve Shattuck's—"

Frank slashed for his gun and blasted two quick shots through a window. He was across the room in a half dozen strides and jumped through the opening. But he was too late! A horse was lifted to a quick run and under cover of a row of cottonwoods pounded away toward town.

"What in hell!" Washburn shouted as he ran up.

"Shattuck must even have men planted on all the ranches," Frank snapped. "He overheard what I said—so Shattuck will be onto the whole play now!"

"I don't get it."

"Don't get it then!" Frank grated. "But if you want yore damn cows, gather up the valley men and meet at my ranch soon as possible! Are you comin'?"

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"Well," Washburn said, "I'll get word to the boys. But I'm warnin' you, Winston. Don't try to pull nothin' fancy!"

Frank whirled away and stalked to his horse. He climbed into the saddle and headed for his own ranch. He approached the house from the rear. Not a light showed and investigation proved that none of his men were about. Run off by Shattuck likely!

Frank eased into the front room and took a seat by an open window. There was nothing he could do now but wait. The whole thing was in the lap of the gods, and if anything went wrong the whole country would be ravaged. His nerve-racking vigil was made worse by the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

It was a long time later that trouble came riding! Frank heard distant shouting and shooting, immediately followed by sound of a hard-ridden horse and on top of that the thunder of a half dozen horses. Frank jerked out his guns and crouched by the window. Then the bellow of Roaring Red Ramsey rose above the tumult: "Open up, Winston, and throw some lead behind me!"

Frank kicked the door wide and opened up with both guns. Red jumped from his horse to the porch and lunged inside, swearing in a voice that could be heard a quarter of a mile.

"Shattuck's men!" he roared. "Pour it to 'em, lad!"

Frank's blazing guns knocked two men out of their saddles. The other four veered away from the deadly fire, wheeled in a circle, and headed for town without checking their horses.

"Light a lamp!" Red bellowed.

Frank did and swore, "Good God!" Red was bloody from head to foot! Swearing a steady stream, he ran experienced fingers over his wounds, then growled, "I'll live, damn it. Somehow Shattuck's got onto the whole thing. His skunks dry-gulched me as I came out of the mountains. Trouble was the slugs knocked me out o' the hull, and 'fore I could drag a man outa his saddle and take his horse, they'd made off with Lucy."

"Lucy!" Frank shot out.

"Yeah, Lucy. She was ridin' here with me."

"What in hell for?"

"I had to make Abel think you'd took her when you got away. How else could I have got the Renfros out o' the mountains?"

"And now Shattuck's got her!" Frank spun toward the door loading his guns as he went.

"Hold it!" Red shouted. "Shattuck's forted up in town by now. I'll take more'n you to buck him. The Renfros'll be along soon. Warn't it a hell of a joke on Abel? I bet he's fit to be tied!"

"I oughta gun you down!" Frank snapped savagely. "What about the proof against Shattuck for the ranchers?"

"Lemme see now," Red scratched his head. "Yeah, they're gonna want proof—"

"You mean to say you ain't—".

Frank's voice was drowned out by the thunder of a flying body of horsemen tearing in from the south. He ran to the porch as the valley ranchers swarmed into the yard. They were a hard-faced, suspicious lot!

"All right, Winston," Washburn rasped. "We're here. Show us what you've got and do it fast! And you'd better make it stick!"

"Sit steady, John," Frank bit out. "Red!"

The giant outlaw swaggered to the porch, grinning wickedly. "Who's

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that hombre?" a rancher yelled. "Maybe Winston's got us surrounded!"

"Hold it!" Frank shouted and then in a low voice to Red spat, "The proof against Shattuck, damn it! What are we goin' to do? They're edgy as a spooked herd!"

"Better talk soothin' to 'em," Red grinned.

"Let's have it, Winston!" Washburn shouted. "If this ain't on the level it's gonna mean a rope—"

"It's on the level!" Frank said harshly. "I'm gonna tell—"

"You better do more'n just tell!" a rancher swore. "We wouldn't believe you on—"

He was cut off by the crash of another group of horsemen sweeping down from the Rideaways. The ranchers swore as they whirled their horses and their hands leaped to their guns. The oncoming riders stopped in the darkness and a voice—the grim voice of old Abel Renfro—rode through the night: "We've come for Lucy, Winston! You've got the valley men ready for war and that's all right with us! But first send Lucy out of it!"

"Damn you for a crooked sidewinder, Winston!" Washburn snarled. His voice lifted to a roar, "Scatter out, men—"

"Hold it!" Frank yelled and leaped to the center of the yard. His two guns were in his fists and Roaring Red was at his side with his guns out and even his grin was a little strained now.

"Come on up here, Abel, you damned old sheepherder!" Red roared. "And come peaceable. First man lifts a gun I'll blast him!"

"That goes double!" Frank snapped, leveling his guns at the ranchers.

Reassured somewhat by Red's presence, the Renfro clan moved cautiously into the yard and squared off against the hostile ranchers. It was an intolerable situation. Taut nerves were cracking under the strain! The first sudden move would set off the dynamite that nothing could stop!

"Ramsey," Abel growled, "where do you stand in this devil's business?"

"Reckon I'm the devil," Red snapped. "Just stand yore hands—listen!"

From the northeast came the sound of blood-curdling yells and flying hoofs and the thunder of a great herd on the move.

"There comes the valley cows Shattuck's been stealin'!" Red

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roared. "Now set easy fer a minute!" A broad grin split his face as he said to Frank: "That's my gang comin'. They been hid out in the foothills, but I told 'em to bring the proof we wanted. Listen to them Injuns come!"

"Damn you, Red, I'm still gonna gun you down!" Frank didn't know any other way to express his relief, but he, too, was grinning.

The ranchers and Renfros sat tight, not knowing what was coming, but realizing something big was afoot. And in a few minutes two hard-riding outlaws swung the point of the herd and shortly afterward the cattle were milling and slowing down.

"Jest hold 'em, boys," Red bellowed. "Oughta be a little gun work later. Now, Frank, tell these men what damned fools they all are!"

And in a driving voice Frank told them. He told them how Shattuck had robbed the ranchers and blamed the mountain men, how he had fanned the feud and kept it alive while he grew fat on it, how he had played them all for suckers and made the play stick. Frank explained how the rustling had been done and when he brought up the supposedly dead Old Blue there could be no denial of the truth. And as final proof Frank pointed out that there were Renfro cows—five hundred of them—in the lowing herd with the valley cows.

The tenseness and hate went out of the gathering so suddenly the men were sheepish. Then came a wild surge of anger at the crook who had knuckled them under. All barriers and lingering doubts were swept away as mountain men and valley men united to lift their voices in a roar of vengeance against the lord of Sunrise Valley. The roar became fiercer as Frank, Abel, Washburn, and Red got together to talk.

They spoke hurriedly, and, when Red told Abel about Lucy, the old man swore mightily. "You ain't got sense God give a barfly, Ramsey! I aim to whup you to a shadow."

"If anything's happened to Lucy," Frank swore, "I'm gonna cut him down with guns!"

"Better come together, boys," Red grinned. "But if anything's happened to Lucy—let's get goin'! What you say 'bout Shattuck bein' a job for the valley and mountain men is all right by me. I'll send my boys to clean out his ranch. But I'm goin' with you. Me and this Frank hellion is gonna team up for a gun chore!"

They rode then—the Renfro clan and the valley ranchers, a mighty band of terrible fighting men welded together in a common cause. And at their head rode old Abel, fierce-looking patriarch of the mountains, and young Frank Winston, tall and straight and a gun wizard, and Roaring Red Ramsey, bloody and wild and untamable and bellowing a song at the top of his voice. The hard-riding cavalcade hit town just as day broke and a solid roar of guns burst from the Golden Horn and the two buildings on either side of it. The Sunrise Valley war had exploded!

With that first volley the riders split in every direction and in a matter of minutes a tight ring was drawn about the besieged buildings. Old Abel, roaring orders at his kinsmen, sprang from cover and crashing guns cut him down.

Roaring Red, cursing terribly, ran toward him and at his side Frank covered him with belching six-guns. In the face of storming lead they dragged the old man to cover.

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"Damn 'em, Abel, damn 'em!" Red choked. "They got you! I'll kill the last son—"

"They ain't got nothin'!" Abel yelled. "Bullet in my thigh so I can't walk. Lead the Renfros, Ramsey, if you're man enough!"

"Damn yore soul!" Red bellowed. "You're too mean to die!"

And he was off to lead the clan. Mountaineers' long rifles blended with ranchers' short guns in a wicked song of death and destruction. Men died in the early gray light of that day, but most of those who died were Shattuck's gun dogs, for the attackers were an avenging horde of wronged men. And in the midst of that mighty horde roved two supermen. Shoulder to shoulder they moved, a slender rapier and a giant broadsword, Frank Winston and Roaring Red Renfro, and the like of their raw courage and deadly gun work had never been seen and would never be seen again!

The Shattuck men were driven from the outside buildings and, steadily creeping forward, the attackers hurled their lead into the Golden Horn until it was a bullet-shattered wreck.

Frank, powder-blackened and tight-lipped, paused to shuck empty shells from his guns and shouted, "Lucy! Reckon she's in there?"

Red swore, "God help 'em if she—look!"

Just for a moment Lucy had appeared at a second-story window of the nearest building before Mace Shattuck jerked her back.

"That room ain't been under much fire," Frank yelled. "Shattuck, the dirty son, is stayin' out of the fight. Figures to use Lucy to bargain his neck out of a noose when it's over. Let's go!"

Frank and Red blasted a path with scorching guns as they raced to the side of the building. From a woodshed to the top of the building they clambered with reckless abandon and their followers poured a hailstorm of lead to cover them.

Frank, with Red crowding him hard, flung back a trapdoor and plunged into the room below. Mace Shattuck whirled, triggered two swift shots upward, then lunged out the door—slamming Lucy against the wall as he passed.

Frank lifted Lucy to her feet and for just a moment held her. Then he jumped for the door.

"Shattuck's mine!" Red roared.

"He's mine!" Frank whipped out.

"Damn you, he's mine! You got Lucy, I reckon Shattuck b'longs to me!"

"Then take him!" Frank finally gave in.

And a moment later Red took him, took him on the roof of the Golden Horn, and he took him with his hands. There was one terrible agonizing scream, then Red lifted the broken hulk in his blood-smeared hands and hurled the lord of Sunrise Valley to the street below! It was all over then.

In the streets where death had left its ravaging fury, peace suddenly bloomed. And in its way it was little short of violent. Ranchers and mountain men herded prisoners out of the Golden Horn, they shouted and laughed together, bandaged one another's wounds, swapped tobacco, and swore eternal friendship.

Old Abel Renfro, proud and happy despite his wound, talked to John Washburn while nearby Frank stood with Lucy. Roaring Red rolled a whiskey barrel out of the saloon, lifted it above his head, drank

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out of the bunghole, then strode over to the group.

"Ramsey," Abel said severely, "you comin' home to yore people now?"

"Don't reckon I can hardly make it," Red boomed. "They's a posse two States away runnin' 'round in circles wonderin' where the hell I am. Got to get back and let 'em know."

"Damned disgrace to the Renfros," Abel growled.

Red stuck out his hand to Frank. "Boy, you can use them cutters," he said. "How 'bout comin' along as my *segundo?*"

"No dice," Frank grinned, and dropped a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "I got me a job."

"Then git it done," Red roared. "Next best thing to a hangin' is a weddin'!"

"It would be the right finish to this job," Abel said with dignity. "It would be like marryin' the valley and the mountains for good."

"I'd take it kindly," John Washburn said, "if it was done at my house. I'll tell the women folks to make things ready."

"I got a job to do," Red stated. "It'll take a little while. Hold that weddin' till I get there."

But after an hour's wait, Abel angrily ordered the ceremony to proceed. Roaring Red never did show up. While everybody was waiting, he cut the Renfro cattle out of the stolen herd and drove them over the mountains! He figured it would be a hell of a joke on Abel!

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***WE ALMOST DIDN'T PRINT THIS ANNOUNCEMENT because we were afraid you'd stay up nights waiting for next week's issue. For next week WILD WEST WEEKLY publishes the greatest collection of exciting, adventurous, gun-quick stories that have ever boomed out of the West! To lead off there's "Christmas Six-guns," a Circle J novelette by Cleve Endicott that's tops. And there's a complete novel by a new author, Mark Lish, that's called "Deacon Wildcat." It's so good and so different from any Western that's ever been published that it'll have you sitting on the edge of your chair, laughing and crying and holding your breath as your eyes race across the page for more! And to top all this, there's a new and different story in pictures, "Omaha Hooker on the Oregon Trail," that shows the life of the Oregon-Trail Pioneers as they really lived it. And there's a Judge Roy Bean story by Dean McKinley, "Santa Rides South," that's a gun-funny, lead-fast roaring yarn of Christmas in the West! And Part IV of Walker Tompkins' magnificent continued novel, "Trail of the Iron Horse." YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS THIS ISSUE! IT'S STILL ONLY 10 CENTS AT YOUR OWN NEWS DEALER'S!***

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# RATTLETRAP RANNY

***Bugeye Martin's malaria went a snake two better and rattled him and Jeff right into a couple of lynch nooses!***

## By Frank J. Litchfield

THERE has been a falts roomer goin around that me and my pard, which is Bugeye Martin, was scairt ½ to death when we blowed town last week in 1 heck of a hurry. But such was not the case nohow, and I can explane ever thing.

Me and Bugeye hightailed it out of Del Rio on acct. of he already had malaria in his system and come

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close to gettin lead poisonin too. And as for me, Jefferson Hokit the 3rd, I come purty near bein Jefferson Hokit the last, and I will start at the beginnin and tell you why.

In the 1st place Bugeye had to go to the doctor to see why all of a suddint 5 or 6 times a day, he would start shakin so his spurs jingled like Santy Claus was comin down Main St. And I went along with Bugeye on acct. of he has got an implement in his speach and stutters so bad I was afrade the doctor couldent understand him.

But the doctor told Bugeye to stick out his tung, which Bugeye done. This was a mitey bad move, because just then Bugeye started shakin again and dang near bit his tung off.

So the doctor said: "Hm-m-m! I thought so. Young man," the doctor told Bugeye, "you have got malaria in yore system and I would advice you to leave town for yore health. In the mean time," the doctor said, "here is some medicine for you. And that will be 3 dollars," he added.

Well, this made me feel kinda sick, too, on acct. of them 3 bucks was all the money me and Bugeye had and Bugeye dident have no job since he was layed off at the feed store where he had been workin part time. But the doctor give Bugeye a box of little pills and a bottle of green stuff and told him to foller the directions, and me and Bugeye went down stares and stood in the door of a vacant pool hall.

I told Bugeye not to mind, on acct. of there would be some kind of murder mistery or crime for us to solve before long. Me and Bugeye are A No. 1 Detectives but have to punch cows or do any thing else for a living in between detecting because the rangers and the sheriffs all think we are to yung.

For a while Bugeye was all rite and dident shake nowhere except in his parts of speach. I told him he had better take some of the medicine so he would stay that way whilst we looked for a job.

But Bugeye said: "G-g-g-gosh, n-n-n-no, J-j-j-jeff, not n-n-now. We p-p-p-paid g-g-g-good money for this m-m-m-medicine," Bugeye told me, "and I am g-g-g-goin to f-f-f-foller the directions to the l-l-letter like the d-d-doctor said."

Well, I dident no what Bugeye ment, but he pointed to the label on the green bottle, and shore enuff, it said "Shake Well Before Taking." So me and Bugeye new the doctor ment for Bugeye to take some of the medicine after he started to have a chill.

We dident have to wate long, however. All of a suddint Bugeye started shakin so bad I told him we had better go out in the street on acct. of he was makin the pool hall windows rattle. Bugeye pulled the cork out of the bottle and took a swig and made an awful face, and just then somethin happened. I will tell you what it was.

Me and Bugeye heard a shot up the street and a couple of yells, and before we could look to see what was goin on, 2 hombres come tearin down the sidewalk and turned in to the door of the pool hall where we stood.

Both of them was tuff lookin gents and when they seen us standin there barrin the way to the pool hall, the short 1 with the yeller eyes and a red bandanna mask jabbed his gun into Bugeyes ribs with a grate deal of forse.

"Skeered, huh?" he ast Bugeye. "Shakin like a leaf. I aint goin to hurt you much, you rattletrap," he

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*Two hombres come tearin' down the sidewalk.*

said, and with that he jerked the barrel of his 45 up Bugeyes shirt buttons and busted Bugeye under the chin.

I couldent do nothin' at this point on acct. of the tall buzzard was gouging a gun into me at the same time.

Well, Bugeye fell down and the short skunk walked on him and they went through the pool hall like it was on fire. I grabbed my gun but it was too late, and them buzzards was already goin out the back door.

"Come on, Bugeye," I hollered, because our horses was back there in the alley. I grabbed Bugeyes collar and yanked him to his feet and he was still shakin and holdin onta that medicine.

"This is awful s-s-s-stuff!" Bugeye said with another shudder, and I figgered the medicine was what had nocked him down and not the crack on his jaw.

"Yes, but you have got to take yore medicine like a man, Bugeye," I told him. "Come on, now," I said.

But before me and Bugeye could go any wheres, we heard boots on the sidewalk, mitey stealthy like, just around the wall from the door. An hombre hollered: "Here they are, men! Here are the coyotes that robbed the store, and 1 of them is scairt to death and the other 1 wants him to surrender and take his medicine like a man. Come on, boys!" he hollered.

Well, I could have explained ever thing then instead of now. But there wasent no chanst. About 13 guns went off at once and the door was full of adobe dust and bullets and I hollered that we was just a couple of innosent by standers, but that dident do no good.

A bullet went through my jumper and passed so close to Bugeyes head it would have hit him if he hadent been shakin. Rite then & there I seen we had both better take the doctors advice and get out of town for our health.

So I grabbed Bugeyes hand and started in the pool hall, the door of which was open. And just then a bullet cut the pool hall sign loose over the door and it fell and hit Bugeyes spurs.

Well, Bugeye fell then, and he nocked his head against the wall with a forse which jarred loose a hole rack of billiard balls and they fell, next, and started bouncin off Bugeyes head like he was in a hale storm.

It is a good thing Bugeye has got a plumb thick skull, an acct. of them billiard balls mite have layed him out. As it was, I grabbed a couple of them and throwed them at the hombres that was all tryin to come in the door at 1 and the same time.

Me and Bugeye figgered there had been some dirty work done and these hombres mistook us for the

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buzzards who done it and so we refraned from pullin our 6 guns on acct. of we dident want to plug nobody in the side of law and order.

But usin a billiard ball is different. The 1st 1 went through a window, but the 2nd hit an hombre in the mouth just as he poked his head through the door and opened his trap to holler for the others to foller.

It nocked a bunch of falts teeth down this mans throte and he choked and me and Bugeye choked too when we seen he was the sheriff.

So I ducked out the door and there was 1 hombre ahead of the rest and mitey close to me. So I stopped just outside and wated till he busted through the door, then I caught him rite back of the ears with the billiard cue.

This nocked him for a couple of summer salts and I run on to the horses. Rite then was when me and Bugeye blowed town in such an all fired hurry on acct. of we dident have no chanst to explane.

We rode toward the Rio Grande,

*There was one hombre ahead of the rest.*

but when we come out of the chaparral we let the horses go into the river for a little way, then turned them upstream and doubled back into the brush and headed north west. This throwed the posse off our trail and we dident have nothin to worry about exsept we was broke and hungry and out of a job all at the same time.

It was nearly dark when we come to the high divide country and seen 2 signs at a fork in the road. The 1 at the top pointed left and said: "This is the Turkey Track Road. Take the other 1. Jake Forbes."

The sign at the bottom pointed to the right and said: "Lazy V ranch. Sheepherders, Turkey Track men and other varmints stop where you are. Pete Massey."

Bugeye started tryin to say somethin, which took him a long time. "L-l-l-looks l-l-like them 2 f-f-f-fellers are k-k-k-kinda s-s-s-sore at 1 another," he finely told me. "Which w-w-w-way will w-w-w-we g-g-g-go?" Bugeye ast.

Well, I was goin to flip a coin to see which way we would go, but I dident, and I will tell you why. It was on acct. of in the 1st place we dident have no coin to flip in the 2nd place. And in the 3rd place, Bugeye had an idea.

Now it aint often that Bugeyes ideas are much good, but this 1 sounded all rite and I had to hand it to Bugeye, figgerin may be them chills had shook up his brain some.

"Why d-d-d-dont w-w-w-we g-g-g-go to t-t-the Lazy V and s-s-s-say we are s-s-s-sore at the T-t-t-turkey Track outfit and ast for a j-j-j-job?" Bugeye ast me.

Well, I had the same idea before Bugeye could tell me about it, but I dident say nothin on acct. of it mite not turn out to be such a good idea after all. But me and Bugeye

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started up the road to the Lazy V, gettin sorer at the Turkey Track every minnit.

Rite then we notised somethin strange about the Lazy V pasture. It was more of the high divide country and there wasent a mesquite tree that was more than 6 ft high, and even then they was about ½ mile apart. Me and Bugeye figgered they must have had a range fire through that country at 1 time or another.

A couple of miles farther and the road dipped down into a canyon and we come up on the Lazy V ranch house before we new it. But not before old Pete Massey new it, because about 6 hounds was barkin and there was old Pete settin on his front porch with a .30-30 Winchester laid acrost his lap.

*Old Pete jerked up the .30-30.*

Old Pete was a skinny runt of an hombre with a big Adams apple stuck out in a scrawny neck. He jerked up the .30-30 and hollered for us to stop where we was and ast what we wanted.

Well, Bugeye started shakin again just then, and I seen old Pete was lookin at him curious like. So I said we was lookin for a job.

"Keep movin and make it pronto!" old Pete yelled. "I ain't got no jobs. What is the matter with that pard of yourn?" he ast. "Is he scairt of this gun?"

I said no, but that Bugeye was mad. "He is so mad at Jake Forbes he dont no what to do with hisself," I said. "And so am I. Any buzzard that would put up a sign like that ought to be shot," I told old Pete.

"Clime down and set awhile," old Pete said, putting up his gun. "May be I have got a job for you 2 hombres after all," he decided. "I could use a pair of good ropers."

Well, me and Bugeye can rope any cow that ever chawed a cud, and I told old Pete so rite away. But he shook his head and his Adams apple pumped up and down a couple of times.

"What I want," he said, "is wood ropers."

"W-w-w-wood r-r-r-ropers?" Bugeye ast, plumb mistified.

"Yes, wood ropers," said old Pete Massey. "I have got a round up crew busy and I dont need no more cowboys. But," he said, "to get wood around here you have to take a waggin out and drive from tree to tree and rope the dead limbs. That will be yore job," he told us.

Me and Bugeye dident like the idea, but old Pete said he would pay us 40 bucks a month apeace and I told Bugeye beggars can not be choosy. So the next mornin me and Bugeye hitched up a waggin team and tied our horses on behind and went out to rope wood.

Rite here and now I want to say it was 1 heck of a job, and that was why when me and Bugeye finely found 1 big tree that was about 20



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ft. high and all dead, we was plumb tickled and started to cuttin it with an axe.

But just then Bugeye seen a maverick yearlin and got the idea that as long as we was workin for the Lazy V and there was a Lazy V brandin iron in the waggin, we ought to burn old Pete Masseys mark in the yearlins hide.

Well, I had ought to no better than to lissen to Bugeye, but I was tired ropin trees and so we untied our horses and piled the twine on this yearlin and bilt a brandin fire. Ever thing would have been all rite exsept for 2 things, and I will tell you what they was.

In the 1st place, Bugeye seen a big rattle snake and killed it, and then tied the 16 rattlers and a button to his cartridge belt. In the 2nd place, Bugeye started to shake like all get out with 1 of his chills just as he slapped that hot iron on the mavericks hide.

Well, the iron slipped and Bugeye branded the yearlin twice almost in the same place but not quite. At this point the maverick let out a beller and so did old Pete Massey, who come ridin up behind us with 4 of his men.

"Well, I'll be a bald faced mule," yelled old Pete. "Rustlers for the Turkey Track outfit!" he hollered and yanked out his gun and so did the other 4 like wise.

You couldn't blame old Pete for bein suspicious when he seen that brand, on acct. of Bugeye had slapped on 2 Lazy Vs with the points runnin together and the bottom arm of 1 just burned over the top arm of the other. The result was mitey surprisin because it shore looked like a Turkey Track mark.

There wasent no chanst to go for a gun. I heard a rope swish through the air and seen Bugeye go jerkin to the ground whilst the brandin iron flew out of his hand. Then I seen we would have to act mitey pronto because old Pete Massey was foamin at the mouth and his Adams apple was havin convolutions.

"Hay," I hollered. "Wate a minnit and we can explane," I said. "My pard has got—"

Well, that was as much as I could say on acct. of just then 1 of them ornery waddies throwed his loop over me from behind and dallied it around his horn and yanked me down to a settin position whilst he dragged me acrost the grass.

This wouldent have been paneful in itself exsept that locoed jasper dragged me rite over the spot where that hot brandin iron was scorchin the ground, and the result was that I let out 2 hoops and a holler that shore enuff skeered Bugeye and at the same time the seat of my pants was branded with the Lazy V brand, onley it wasent put on like a Lazy V, but is up side down with 1 arm of the V goin down each pants leg. This makes it look like a Rafter brand, but I am here to tell you that it was just as paneful as if it had been a Lazy V or any thing elts.

"S-s-s-stop!" hollered Bugeye when I let out them screaches of pane. "S-s-s-stop, I t-t-t-tell you! D-d-d-do you w-w-w-want t-t-to k-k-k-kill J-j-j-jeff?" he ast old Pete whilst we was both bein dragged over the divide at a mitey rapid rate of speed.

"Yes!" old Pete hollered back, hittin spurs to his horse. "And that is what I am goin to do!" he added in a nasty tone of words. "String them up and leave them there, boys," he told his cowpokes.

Well, I seen what they was goin to do. They was draggin us rite under that big tree we had started to cut down and the waggin was

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standin plumb handy, and 1 of them took my gun before I could get my arm loose enuff to try drawin it, which was mitey lucky for them, on acct. of I would have plugged them freely if I had had a chanst.

"Git up on that waggin!" said old Pete, whilst my own gun was poked in to my ribs so hard I expected to see the site protrudin from the other side.

So I got up and so did Bugeye, and he was shakin so bad that set of rattlers sounded like a sidewinder coilin in a prickly pair bush.

"Fix a noose, boys," said old Pete. Which they done, on both of us, and then they throwed the rope over the same limb.

"Look here, I can explane ever thing," I told old Pete, but he waved his arm and 1 of them jaspers started drivin the team forward and the next thing me and Bugeye new there wasent nothin under our boots but some mitey thin air.

Well, we wouldent be here to tell about it now if somethin hadent happened, and I will tell you what it was.

There was 1 heck of a jolt that nearly busted my neck and I reckon Bugeye felt the same thing. Then there was 1 heck of a crashin noise, and that dead tree busted at the bottom where me and Bugeye had it cut about ½ through.

The tree come fallin over. Some body let out a yell, but it wasent us, on acct. of them ropes was so tite we couldent even whisper.

It was 1 of them cowpokes yellin for old Pete to look out, but old Pete dident hear him in time. And the tree come down with a crackin noise and a big limb busted old Pete acrost his head and nocked him out of his saddle.

Well, before he could move a finger, me and Bugeye was on him like a couple of flashes and I grabbed my gun which old Pete had been holdin, and Bugeye grabbed old Petes gun and we whirled on them other jaspers and yelled for them to put up their hands and be dang quick about it.

They seen we had the drop on them this time and 2 of them reeched, but the other 2 was behind the waggin and they cut down at us with their 45s. When they done this the team started to run and shied around until 1 of the big limbs on that tree got caught under the axle of the waggin.

This started to make trouble for me and Bugeye, and I will tell you why. The team kept on goin and the tree started draggin and the ropes got tite.

Me and Bugeye was bein dragged acrost the divide again by our throtes this time, and them jaspers jerked out their guns and started shootin all around us, throwin dirt in our eyes with them bullets.

We shot back and 1 of us got 1 of them hombres in the leg and he fell off his horse hollerin murder and just then the waggin went through a prickley pair and Bugeye did too, and Bugeye dropped his gun.

Things was lookin mitey searious for us then but they got worse on acct. of a slug hit my gun and knocked it out of my hand and just then the waggin stopped on acct. of the team got tangled up in another mesquite.

Now them 3 hombres that was still in their saddles come ridin up and 1 of them, a short jasper, jumped off his horse and come toward us with his hammer pulled back ready to let us have it.

Well, I reckon he desided to shoot me 1st. He growled at Bugeye and said: "You had better shake, now, you rattletrap!" and then he turned

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his back on Bugeye and pointed the 45 at me and I seen he had yeller lookin eyes and when he called Bugeye a rattletrap I new he was the short buzzard who was wanted for robbin that store in Del Rio.

There wasent nothin we could do about it just then. But all of a suddint Bugeye did start to shakin, and he shook so hard that set of rattlers tied to his belt was soundin just like a buzz tail.

The short hombre jumped like he was mitey shy of rattle snakes, and when he jumped he backed into that big prickley pair, and a couple of thorns stabbed him in the seat of his pants.

Well, he let out a yell. "Rattler!" he hollered. "I am bit, Slim, I am bit!"

He dropped his gun and clapped both of his hands to the seat of his pants and when he done this I grabbed the gun and me and the tall, slim hombre shot at the same time, onley he missed and I dident. He set down mitey suddint and hard and dropped his gun.

"Throw up yore hands!" I told the short buzzard. "If you are rattle snake bit you had better confess," I advised him. "What did you do with the dinero you took from that store?" I ast firmly.

The 3rd hombre was so surprised at this he dident try to shoot and by this time Bugeye managed to get his neck out of the noose and come up from behind this man and grab his arm.

At the same time the short skunk was rollin on the ground sayin he was rattle snake bit and hollerin that Slim had the money. But Slim turned on him whilst he was settin down clutchin his shoulder where my bullet had busted him, and called Shorty 6 kinds of a yeller liar.

"You no you hid that dinero in the bunkhouse, under yore mattress," Slim groaned, rockin back and forth.

Well, that was all me and Bugeye wanted to no. So I got loose from the rope and we picked up old Pete Massey, who was comin to by this time, and loaded him and Shorty and Slim into the waggin, and then we went to the ranch house.

Ever body in Del Rio nos how we come back with the 2 robbers and the money. But Bugeye was still shakin now and then, and that was how that roomer got around that he was skeered. But the roomer was entirely falts, and when Bugeye is well we can proof it.

Another Bugeye and Jeff story coming soon—with lots of laughs!


# "I TALKED WITH GOD"

## (yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.


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# Cimarron Sam's Resolve

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

It's New Year's mornin' an' Cimarron Sam
  Gits thinkin' he don't live right.
He blows his pay till he hasn't a dime,
An' is lookin' for trouble the most of the time,
  For he's too durned fond of a fight.

As he figgers fightin' is jest the thing
  He oughter do somethin' about,
He remembers a preacher he heered last week
Who talked about turnin' the other cheek.
  So he reckons he'll try that out.

He resolves an' swears that for one hull year,
  He'll do what the preacher said.
Then he goes for to eat in Blake's Hotel,
Jest as some jasper is raisin' hell,
  An' he bats Sam 'side of the head.

This comes on Sam real suddenlike,
  But he knows what he must do.
So he tries to look real mild an' meek,
An' turns an' shows the other cheek,
  An' the bird belts that one, too.

Hell-bent on keepin' his new resolve,
  Sam turns his head oncet more,
Though the preacher had spoke of jest two blows.
But the hombre hits him a sock in the nose,
  An' sets Sam down on the floor.

Now Sam's resolve was for jest the cheek,
  That shore was plain enough,
It didn't include no sock in the snoot,
So Sam gits up an' he grabs that coot
  An' starts a-usin' him rough.

He spiles the table an' all the chairs
  As he batters that bird around.
Then he hits him one last final smack,
An' knocks him plumb through the side of the shack.
  An' leaves him lay on the ground.

Now Sam is keepin' that good resolve,
  But it ain't been workin' right.
He never gits no blow on the cheek,
But a punch in the eye or a bang on the beak,
  Then he starts right in to fight.

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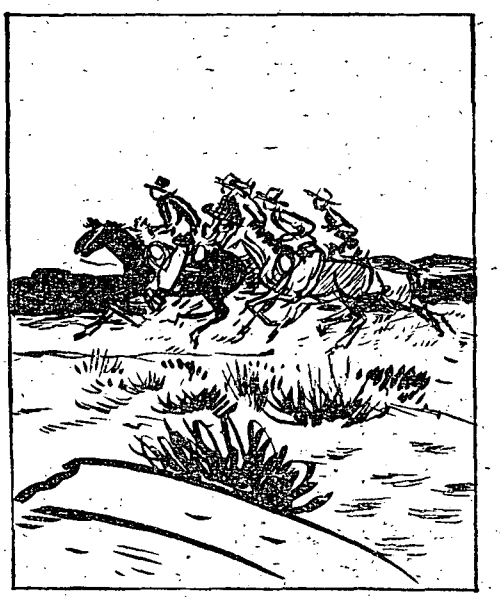
# BRONC EVANS

1. Bronc Evans and Bart Albers watched one of the Bar A cowboys ride into the ranch yard. "Thet waddy acts queer," said Bart. "Looks like he got hisself liquored up." The man fell off his horse. "He's bad hurt, boss!" cried Bronc.

2. They found that the waddy was badly shot up with .45 slugs. "How'd it happen, pard?" Bronc asked. The wounded cowpoke replied: "Fanner Dolbie's back with a new gang. They jumped me in Owl Canyon." Bart shook his head.



3. They lugged the wounded cowboy into the ranchhouse and made him as comfortable as they could. Then they rounded up the Bar A hands and rode into Owl Canyon. "I've cut the sign o' Fanner an' his gang!" Bronc cried.

4. Sol Meggs, the Bar A foreman, stationed Bronc and another cowboy at the fork of a canyon trail. "Stay hyar an' watch them trails," he ordered. "I'll ride on with the rest o' the boys. We'll hang thet Fanner hombre's hide on the fence."

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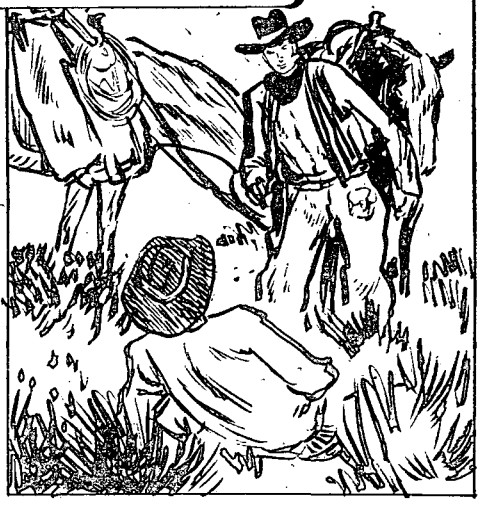
# WINS HIS SPURS

5. After waiting a while, Bronc and the other cowboy heard shooting. "The boys has jumped Fanner!" whooped Bronc. "Him an' his gang is shootin' it out with Bar A! Let's ride!" Drawing their six-guns, they rode down the trail.



6. A wounded hombre lay in low brush just off the trail. "It's Sol!" Bronc cried, swinging down from his saddle. Sol tried to get up, but fell back each time. His shirt front was blood-soaked. The cowboy who had come with Bronc rode on.

7. Sol was dying. As Bronc bent over him, the foreman whispered: "Fanner done it. Take off my spurs an' give 'em tuh Bart Albers. He gave 'em tuh me when he made me foreman. The Bar A ramrod always wears 'em."

8. Bronc spread his slicker over Sol's body, then rode down the trail. "Sol an' me was amigos," he choked out. "I'm honin' tuh meet up with his killer. It's time Fanner Dolbie was buzzard bait. Him an' me is overdue fer a reckonin'!"

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9. A horse and rider shot out of the woods and into the trail. It was Fanner! He and Bronc reined in sharply, averting a head-on collision of their cayuses. "He's hightailin' it from the gun fight," Bronc thought. "Thet means we won."

10. In a blur of speed, they went for their guns. Fanner was fast, but Bronc was a shade faster. His hand slapped the butt of his Colt while Fanner's was midway in its swoop. It was the fast draw Bronc learned in his circus days.

11. Bronc's Colt barrel leveled, and he triggered. His shot and Fanner's blended into a single roar of six-gun thunder. Fanner had "fanned" his .45 as he aimed it at Bronc, thus making up for the split second lost when Bronc drew first.

12. A burning pain stabbed Bronc's left side as if it had been seared by a red-hot branding iron. He felt himself slipping from his saddle, but was powerless to grab leather and hang on. As he fell, he glimpsed Fanner lurching, too.

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13. That was the last that Bronc knew for a long time. He lay on the ground, seemingly dead. Not far away lay Fanner, also dead, it seemed. Bart rode up then and found them. "Bronc's done fer, pore kid," he mourned.

14. Bart and the cowboy with him dismounted. To their surprise, Bronc got up from the ground! There was a bullet hole in his left side. "Missed my heart," he thought. "Must 'a' hit a rib an' glanced off it."

15. He drew a pair of spurs from a chaps pocket and handed them to Bart. "Sol Meggs is dead," Bronc told him. "Fanner kilt him. Jest afore he died, he got me tuh take these spurs off him an' promise tuh give 'em tuh yuh."

16. Bart handed the spurs back to Bronc. "Put 'em on, son," he said. "Yuh rubbed out the last o' the big rustler bosses round hyar. Yuh made the Bar A a payin' proposition." Bronc took the spurs. Now he was ramrod at last.

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# Steerville's Antedeluvian Ancestor

By E. A. BRININSTOOL

Us fellers here at Steerville aims to give the world the truth,
But we've sot all tongues a-waggin' sence unearthin' of a tooth!
Smoky Thompson was the finder, and he sez it sure appears
That the hombre whose jaw wore it lived way back a millyun years!

So he writ a piece about it, which he sent away back East
To a paper that was boostin' a prehistoric man and beast.
And the editor responded, "Hallelujah!-I believe
That the molar you're describin' antedates ol' Mother Eve!"

So he played it up right proper, as an honest writer would,
And we reckoned it was somethin' that would boost ol' Steerville good!
But in tellin' you the outcome, my untutored English fails
In describin' how the public knocks us through the U. S. mails!

Noo Yawk wimmens' clubs hev writ us what they think of Smoky's find,
And a skulemarm down in Texas, right in meetin', spoke her mind!
While a bunch of missionaries, on this sphere of vice and sin,
Have been sendin' scads of letters that our claims is mighty thin!

We've been called a bald-faced liar by a preacher back in Maine!
We've been dubbed a nature-faker by some furrin' gent in Spain!
And an old Montana cowman, who is handy with a gun,
Sez he's comin' down to trim us soon as brandin' season's done!

So we're layin' low at present, in this scientific spat,
And we're watchin' all the stages fer that gent who packs a gat!
While we're strong fer new discoveries that'll give the world a thrill,
We ain't anxious *poco pronto* fer to decorate boothill!

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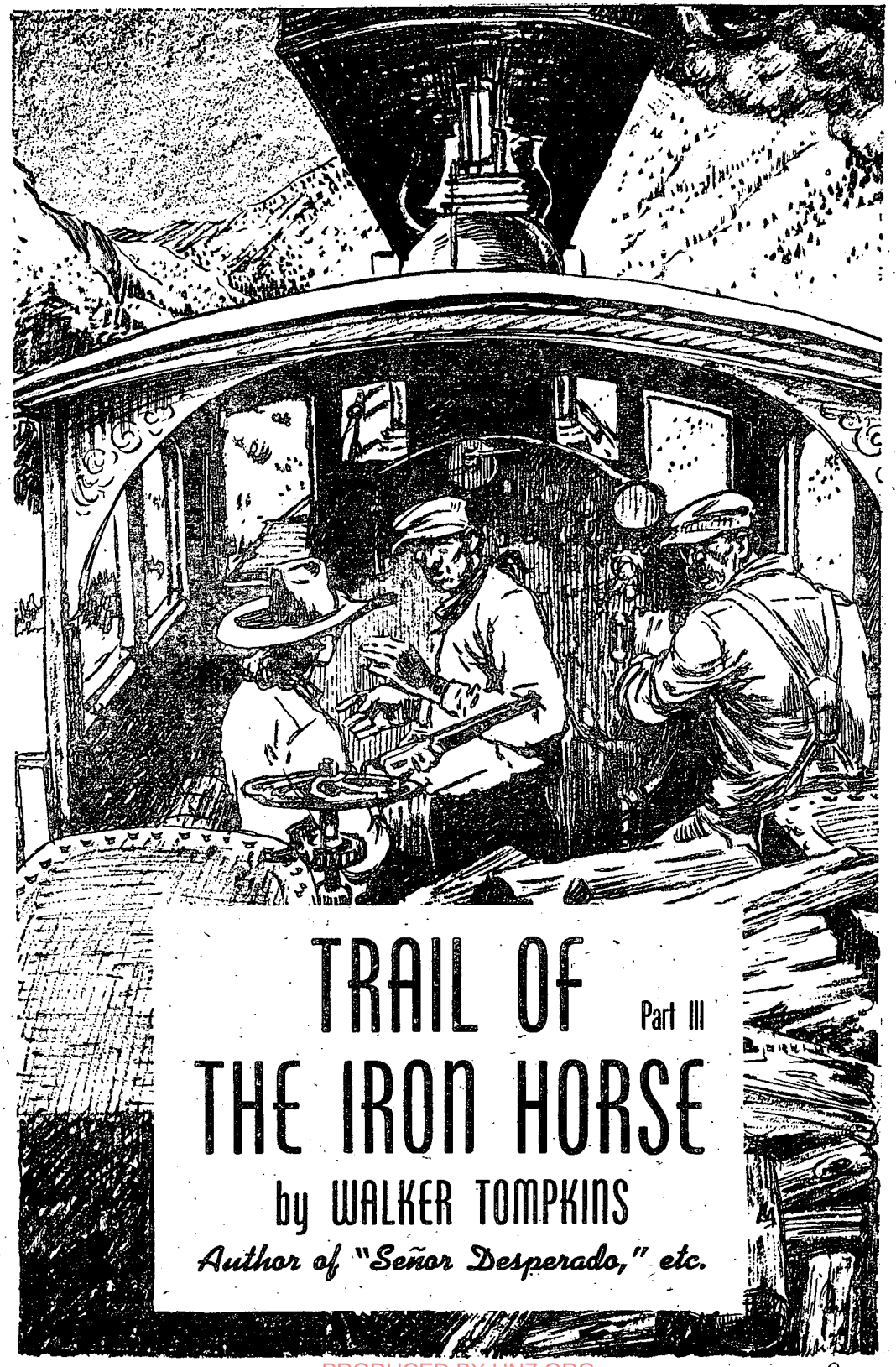

# TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

Part III

by WALKER TOMPKINS

*Author of "Señor Desperado," etc.*

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# TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

***The sharp reports of rifles screamed through the blasting steam—and Quent Preston's life hung by a hair!***

## By Walker Tompkins

*The Story So Far:*

QUENT PRESTON, young cowpoke, and his father,

PANHANDLE PRESTON, have come from Texas to Wyoming where they build up a ranch in lonely Tomahawk Pass. On a ride to Wagonwheel Springs they are amazed and disgusted to see a roaring end-of-track railroad camp mushroomed overnight. The Union Pacific Railroad is cutting through the country, intruding on their lonely wilderness.

In an altercation over a watering charge for their horses,

CY TROLLEN, a frontier renegade is accidentally killed by Quent. A bloodthirsty mob, goaded by the camp marshal,

LIGE MORTON, starts to lynch young Quent when

BOONE DELIVAN, a smooth though hard-bitten speculator in railroad rights-of-way, intercedes and saves the Prestons. The mob turns its wrath on the marshal because he surrendered his prisoner too readily.

Delivan casually offers to buy the Preston's ranch, wanting it much more than he pretends. Delivan is artfully sided in this offer by

ELLIS BAYARD, a crafty and unscrupulous lawyer. The Prestons, though grateful to Delivan, refuse to sell.

The next day, Quent, attacked by an enraged cougar on the ranch, is saved by the straight shooting of

HELEN GORINE, daughter of the U.P.'s chief surveyor,

MAJOR GORINE, who has started a survey in Tomahawk Pass. The girl returns to the survey camp and Quent to the ranch. Here he discovers

LINN DePERREN, a Delivan henchman, trying to persuade Panhandle to sell the homestead. When Panhandle refuses, DePerren kills him.

Enraged and dazed by this wanton killing, Quent pursues DePerren and kills him as the latter pulls a hide-out derringer. But a survey party, approaching on horseback, has seen him fire, and, to them, it looks like cold murder.

Major Gorine, the leader of the party, arrests Quent, but he escapes and returns to the ranch. He buries his father there. A few nights later the ranch is surrounded by paid killers of Delivan who burn his cattle off the range, burn down the corrals and house, and attempt to kill Quent. He outwits the outlaws, however, kills most of them, and captures one. He is returning to Wagonwheel to turn in his captive, whose testimony will convict Delivan, when he meets Major Gorine. The major is convinced of Quent's innocence by the captive's story, but just then a shot from a rimrock kills the gunnie. The only witness against Delivan has died! Foolishly, Quent proceeds to Wagonwheel and retains Delivan's lawyer, Ellis Bayard, who, unknown to Quent, is in Delivan's pay. Quent lets slip information that the papers to the homestead are buried under the burned ranchhouse. Ellis tricks him into the back room of his tent office, and Quent is smashed over the head!

### CHAPTER XV.

#### FRAMED FOR MURDER.

DELIVAN thrust his blood-smeared revolver into a holster under his armpit and withdrew his hand from beneath the lapel of his black frock coat.

Quent Preston lay motionless at the speculator's feet.

"Fast work, calling me over here," panted Delivan gratefully, his eyes on the pasty-faced lawyer. "It won't be hard to dispose of Preston's body before daylight—then we'll be set."

Bayard mopped a handkerchief

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over his shiny face and moisture-dripping double chins. He inquired shakily:

"Is he dead?"

Delivan stooped to inspect the ghastly welt on the Texan's head. The clubbing gun butt had split the scalp to expose raw bone beneath.

"No. But that can be managed without noise—or should we gag him and tie him up, and force him to sign over title papers to Tomahawk Pass when he comes to?"

The lawyer took down a whiskey bottle from a shelf and swigged a stiff drink to bolster his shattered nerves. Bayard was not used to violence. The occasional shooting scrapes he had seen on the main street had left him with a nauseated feeling.

This was the first time Bayard had ever actually witnessed the ruthless side of Boone Delivan's nature. He had guessed, and correctly, that the smooth-mannered renegade was out here on the frontier because of some crime he had committed in the East. But heretofore, Ellis Bayard's unscrupulous talents had been linked to Delivan only as the speculator's legal front.

"No . . . no. Get him out of my place," pleaded the lawyer. "I can't have a body found in here. We . . . we can forge his signature easily enough."

The lawyer brightened as he remembered something.

"We've got this Tomahawk Pass deal in the bag. Preston just got through telling me his government deed to the ranch homesteads is buried under the floor of his cabin. It shouldn't take long to dig it up—"

Both men started violently as they heard boots slogging up the front steps of Bayard's office, from the main street.

They knew it was impossible that any passerby could have seen Delivan slug the cowboy here in the back room, for Bayard had closed the door after Preston's entrance.

Delivan stooped to peer through the keyhole in time to see the front door kicked open without the formality of a knock. Framed on the top doorstep was the disheveled figure of Lige Morton, the city marshal.

Indistinct against the backdrop of the night were two burly men in United States army uniforms.

"Preston come in here after he beat me up!" screamed the marshal, pointing a bony finger into the lawyer's office. "I seen him with my own eyes, talkin' to Bayard—just before I got you! Come on!"

Both of the soldiers bore the arm badges of military police, whose duties consisted of patrolling the construction camp of nights and keeping law and order. Their authority was supreme, Lige Morton being a mere figurehead hired by the saloons to eject troublesome customers.

"We'll try the back room, Morton!" clipped one of the military policemen. "There's a light back there—"

Boone Delivan stooped and jerked one of Quent Preston's .45 Colts from its holster. Aiming through the keyhole, he sent a bullet smashing through the thin-paneled partition.

Out in the front office, Lige Morton gagged on a scream of agony and clawed at a spouting bullet hole in his stomach. Then, twisting sideways as his knees buckled, the marshal pitched backward against the very legs of the startled soldiers.

With incredibly fast movements, Delivan inserted the smoking six-gun in Preston's limp hand. Then, rising through a curtain of billowing

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gun fumes, he dug iron-muscled fingers into Bayard's trembling arm and hissed out:

"Tell those army men that Preston shot Morton, understand? Then you knocked Preston out with that whiskey bottle!"

Before Ellis Bayard could draw in a gasping breath, Boone Delivan had stepped noiselessly to a side window, straddled the sill, and dropped into the blackness of the night.

From the front room came a harsh command:

"Open up and come out with your hands up!"

Bayard gulped hard. He stared down at the whiskey bottle, transferred his pudgy hand to the neck of the bottle. Then, stumbling forward, the corpulent lawyer shoved open the partition door and faced the grim military police.

Both soldiers stood wide-legged behind Morton's twitching corpse, their heavy-bore army pistols trained at Bayard.

"Hell's bells!" ejaculated one of the policemen, whom Bayard recognized as a Corporal Tracy. "Who'd ever thought that fat shyster had the guts to commit a murder!"

Bayard made a sickly grin and stood aside to reveal Quent Preston's prostrate body to the startled soldiers.

"It wasn't me who . . . who shot, corporal," stammered the lawyer in a sick voice. "This Preston fellow did it—without warning—when Morton came into my front office Preston pulled a gun and shot—then I knocked him out with this bottle—"

Corporal Tracy holstered his pistol and stepped over Morton's body on his way to the partition door.

"I'll be damned!" breathed the soldier admiringly. "So you belted him on the noggin with that bottle, eh? Good work!"

The lawyer nodded eagerly, cheeks ballooning with relief as he saw that Delivan's trumped-up explanation of the killing had passed muster with the hard-eyed military police.

"That's right, corporal. Oh—this is awful—had no idea— We were talking over a business deal—had come back here to get a drink of bourbon—then this happened—"

Bayard glanced over at Morton's corpse. His shudder at sight of the marshal's blood, clotting in a sticky puddle on the floor, was so genuine it brought a grin of sympathy to the corporal.

"Take it easy, Bayard. We'll handle this gunman— Who is he, you know?"

"His name's Preston. I think—he's the same man who killed that Trollen fellow over by the waterhole several days ago."

The two soldiers entered the back room and knelt beside Preston's limp form. One of them removed the smoking Colt from the cowboy's hand and nodded significantly. The other was examining the splinter-collared puncture in the flimsy partition, where the fatal slug had sped on its way to Morton's body.

"Wonder what Preston had against Morton?" mused Corporal Tracy curiously. "He came running up to us just as Sergeant Kelly here and me were coming out of the Red Tent Saloon. Said he'd been disarmed and beat up by Preston a few minutes ago."

"It's a damned shame we didn't surround the building," put in Sergeant Kelly, "otherwise Morton would be alive now."

Bayard took another drink from the amber bottle in his hands, the

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*The burly soldiers held Quent Preston's limp body under the armpits.*

whiskey leaking down his pink-shaven chins.

"Preston was a desperate character—wanted for killing a sheriff down in Texas," fabricated the lawyer, his tongue getting more fluent now that the alcohol was in his blood. "I shouldn't have let him in my office in the first place."

The two army policemen lifted Preston by the armpits, hoisting the six-foot-four cowboy to his feet with difficulty.

"Colonel Sires is holding a court-martial tomorrow morning for some other murderers," said Tracy. "They'll see to it that Preston doesn't pull off another killing. You better be on hand at the court-martial, Bayard, to help testify."

The paunchy lawyer followed the officers to the front door, rubbing flabby palms together with satisfaction.

"Of course, corporal, of course. I will be on hand."

Curious spectators halted out in the street as they saw the burly sol-

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diers emerge from Bayard's Land Office with Quent Preston's inert bulk hanging limply in the grasps of his captors.

"We'll send men back for Morton's body as quick as we get this desperado locked up in the jail car," said Tracy. "Don't let anybody in to disturb the body."

Bayard bowed jerkily, resembling a toadlike Japanese god in the doorway. "I shan't let anyone in," he reassured them.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### GORINE DECLARES HIMSELF.

THE largest and most pretentious structure in Wagonwheel City was the End-of-Track Hotel.

Its mammoth spread of canvas roofs covered an area a city block square, and was divided off into dozens of rooms and a maze of corridors by means of flimsy portable partitions.

Ten dollars per night was the fee for the dubious privilege of resting on cheap army cots with one blanket and no conveniences other than a packing-case dresser, a pitcher of water, and a tallow candle. Yet the End-of-Track register was always full.

A fifty-by-hundred-foot lobby flanked the main street. Its earthen floor was copiously sawdusted. A bar with an imported mahogany counter and huge back-bar mirror occupied a prominent corner. From sundown until three o'clock every morning the lobby was ablaze with the lights of a score of suspended lamps.

At this hostelry gathered the richer classes. Union Pacific stockholders, professional gamblers, army officers, silk-hatted capitalists out from New York or Philadelphia or St. Louis to visit the turbulent scenes at end-of-track.

It was natural that Boone Delivan should choose to make his living quarters in the End-of-Track Hotel. He maintained a "suite" of rooms as pretentious as those occupied by General Dodge on his inspection tours.

After Delivan had made his hasty and secret departure from the dangerous locality of Bayard's back room, he crossed the main street at an unhurried gait, attracting no attention whatsoever.

He was sure no one had noticed Ellis Bayard coming through the hotel lobby to summon him over to the Land Office less than five minutes before. Delivan had always been careful not to cultivate acquaintances. Therefore his comings and going were always unnoticed in the hubbub of the town's restless life.

A consummate sense of victory filled Delivan's being as he headed for a luxurious leather-cushioned settee facing the hotel's bat-wing doors, and seated himself there.

As Bayard had said, the Tomahawk Pass right-of-way deal was in the bag. With Preston once out of the way a tidy fortune would drop into Delivan's lap, with proper maneuvering of forged documents and bribe money paid to the proper Union Pacific grafters.

Taking an expensive Cuban cheroot from his waistcoat pocket, Delivan lighted up, puffed luxuriously, and unfolded a copy of a Baltimore paper which devoted several front-page columns to the progress of the Union Pacific railroad, fast reaching its terminus in Utah.

The paper made much of the Sioux attacks which had harried the line, describing how work trains were derailed and bridges destroyed and

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rails torn up by the hostile Indian war parties.

The Central Pacific, by contrast, was hindered only by the heat of the arid desert terrain it was spanning through from California.

Delivan was engrossed in the newspaper when he heard his name called out sharply in the din of the lobby.

Without betraying his inward jump of alarm, the speculator lowered his paper and glanced up. Major John Gorine and Helen were standing before him, hats in hand, their clothes moist with horse sweat and dusty with the alkali of a long trail.

"Well! This *is* a surprise!" greeted Delivan heartily, with his usual flashing smile as he stood up and bowed to Helen. "What brings you folks to Wagonwheel City this time of night?"

Delivan's voice trailed off as he saw the fire in Helen's eyes, her locked mouth and clenched fists. Major Gorine was glowering at him and his greeting had been hostile.

"I beg your pardon," apologized the speculator, standing aside to point to the settee. "Won't you sit down?"

Major Gorine stepped forward, eyes blazing into Delivan's.

"No, thank you. Thank God, we aren't too late—but we sighted a big Sioux camp on the way down, and had to circle twenty miles out of the way."

Delivan's brow gathered into worried lines. Never had the Gorines spoken in such truculent accents. Yet it was evident that the father and daughter had just arrived. That being the case, it was doubtful that they knew of Preston's arrest.

"What's wrong?" inquired Delivan gravely. "Why . . . why do you look at me this way, Helen?"

Major Gorine's fiery gaze silenced Delivan.

"You might as well have the blunt truth, Boone. Your paid killer, Weldon, has stripped off your sheep's clothing. Helen and I know exactly the stripe of cur you are."

Delivan exhaled a long breath of cheroot smoke. His masklike face gave no hint of his mental turmoil.

The three surviving members of his raiding gang to Tomahawk Pass had reported at Wagonwheel Springs at dusk, telling Delivan of the destruction of Preston's range and the heavy toll which the Texas cowboy had taken of the other members of the raiding gang.

They had reported, likewise, the death of Weldon on the trail out of Tomahawk Pass that morning. But Delivan had not dreamed that Weldon had turned traitor and betrayed him.

"There must be some mistake," insisted the speculator blandly. "I have never heard of a gentleman named Weldon, much less hired him. It wounds me deeply to think that Helen could mistrust—"

The girl cut him off with a low cry.

"I . . . I hate you, Boone. I've hated you ever since I caught you lying about . . . about not knowing that De Perren brute. You've plotted to kill Quent Preston, but you failed. You . . . you—"

Delivan hid the tug of alarm in his heart behind a laugh.

"My dear girl," he chided, "someone has been telling you fairy tales. Did I not risk my life to save Preston's? Why should I try to murder him?"

Major Gorine moved between his daughter and the nonchalant speculator, as if to protect her from Delivan's tolerant gaze.

"Boone, we rode here to warn you



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to get out of town. To get as far from here as you can. Preston's looking for you. He'll kill you on sight."

Delivan flicked ash from his cigar with a manicured nail.

"If you both hate me—why do you ride fifty miles to warn me to beware of this desperado?"

"Because," flared the railway surveyor hotly, "we don't want your blood on Preston's hands. We want you to get out,- damn you—take your filthy money and get out before Preston sends you to the cemetery where you belong!"

Delivan bowed mockingly, his face betraying no concern.

"All this is most interesting. I—"

Delivan broke off as he caught sight of Ellis Bayard shouldering through the batwing doors of the hotel lobby and heading in his direction, face purple with excitement.

"Boone! Boone!" cried the lawyer, lumbering up to the speculator's side. "Preston—oh, excuse me. Miss Gorine—Major—"

Delivan's eyes flashed a warning to the agitated lawyer.

"What's all the excitement, Mr. Bayard?"

The lawyer rolled his eyes, gulped, looked from Delivan to the Gorines, and then panted heavily:

"An awful thing just happened over in my office, Boone. Quent Preston—that Texan you saved from hanging, remember? He came into my office to get me to handle a right-of-way deal for him. And —and the town marshal came in, Lige Morton. And in cold blood, Preston shot Morton dead!"

Major Gorine's face went chalky white. He groped out an arm to draw Helen closer to him. The girl's eyes were wide with horror as she stared at the babbling attorney.

"Apparently your friend Mr. Preston is going to shoot up the whole town until he finds me," said Delivan sarcastically. "What became of Mr. Preston, Bayard? Did he escape?"

Bayard swabbed his face with a moist handkerchief.

"No, thank heavens. The killer got his just deserts. Two army policemen were with Morton at the time. I . . . I knocked out Preston with a bottle. They took him to jail. He's to be court-martialed in the morning."

Helen Gorine and her engineer father stared at each other in mutual horror. Then Major Gorine drew back his shoulders and bit out defiantly:

"I'll be at that court-martial tomorrow, Delivan. After I've finished my testimony in Preston's behalf, you'll wish you'd gotten out of Wagonwheel City!"

With which words, Gorine turned on his heel and left the hotel, Helen at his side.

After the bat-wing doors had flapped shut on their departure, Delivan said to Bayard without moving his eyes from the door:

"There'll be hell to pay if Gorine testifies, Bayard. He knows enough to hang the two of us."

Bayard's flabby face turned to the color of banana meat.

"You can't—drag me into this!" whined the lawyer. "I . . . I've done your dirty work so far as doctoring papers is concerned. But . . . I didn't contract . . . to get mixed up with murder, Boone!"

Delivan flicked his cheroot stub to the floor and cut off Bayard with an angry oath, his eyes still gimleting into space.

"Keep your blabbing mouth shut, Bayard. You won't be mixed up in this. I'll make sure Major Gorine

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doesn't spill the beans at Preston's hearing tomorrow morning!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### COURT-MARTIAL.

IT was still dark when Quent Preston recovered consciousness to find himself stretched on a cold wooden floor.

He sat up, groping both hands to his temples. The entire back of his skull seemed to be splitting open, stabbing darts of pain hammering his brain at each throb of his heart.

His fingers came away sticky from an egg-sized welt above his left temple. The touch of his hand brought on nausea and faintness, and he sagged back on the splintery floor, moaning.

Gradually as his senses cleared, Preston became conscious of vague sounds. The raucous yells of men, mingled with the occasional high-pitched laughter of women.

Somewhere a wolf bayed at the stars on a distant ridge. It was the only familiar sound that reached Quent's ears.

After an eternity of lying on the hard floor, Preston stirred himself and sat up. The pain was undiminished in his head, but memory began to return as he cudgeled his brain to figure out his present predicament.

"Let's see—I was going into that lawyer's back room—then I must have been slugged—Delivan—*Delivan!*"

The name hissed from his lips like something unclean to be spat from his mouth. The name brought back, in a hideous rush, all the hate and revenge lust that had smoldered there during his ride out of the Sioux Bonnets the afternoon before.

Groping in the pocket of his buckskin shirt, the cowboy found matches. He struck one and peered about, eyes widening with puzzlement at the strangeness of his surroundings.

He was sitting on the floor of a cubicle six feet square. Two of the walls were of heavy wooden timbers, painted maroon. The other two walls were formed of thick iron latticework, rusty in patches. A tremendous iron lock marked a door.

Shakily, the Texan got to his feet, and his head came level with a small barred window on his left. A night breeze blew out the match in his fingers, and he stood there, hanging to one iron-latticed wall for support.

Peering out, he caught sight of the glowing, lamplighted tents of Wagonwheel City, like ghostly blobs in the night. The prison in which he found himself seemed to be elevated a dozen feet above the sagebrush flats on which the construction camp was built.

A shifting wind brought a hodgepodge of sound from the town: tinpanny music from an off-key piano; bottles rattling on saloon shelves; the shouts of a barker outside a dance hall; the yammer of dogs.

"Wonder where in hell I am, and how I got here?"

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Preston struck another match and set fire to a crumpled newspaper on the floor. The flames threw out a lemon-yellow glare, and by the guttering light Preston discovered that he was inside a railroad car.

He recognized the curved, varnished ceiling, with its roof ventilators and hanging kerosene lamps; sliding doors a dozen feet from his cell. A man slept, curled up like a dog, in an adjoining cage. Over by the car door a sentry in army uniform roused out of a doze and jumped up with an oath.

"What you tryin' to do, man—burn down the car? Stomp out that paper!"

"What am I doing in here?" demanded Preston as the guard peered through the latticework at him.

"You're in the army hoosegow, feller. Put out that fire!"

"In jail? What in hell for?"

The sentry grunted sarcastically. "For killin' the town marshal, that's all. Or have you forgotten?"

A cold shock went through Preston. Lige Morton dead? Quent remembered striking the scrawny marshal, but it had not even been a knock-out blow. It seemed impossible that Morton could have died as a result of his punch.

The flaming newspaper turned to curling, pink-edged ashes in the corner of his cell. A wet ooze filmed Preston's face.

"I didn't kill Morton," he protested in a low voice. "I've been framed somehow. Boone Delivan and—"

"Save your arguments for the court-martial, feller. It's four a. m. now. You'll be facin' a military judge at eight, so calm down and don't wake up these other poor devils."

The sentry returned to his post by the door of the wheeled jailhouse and resumed his snoring.

Preston propped himself in a seated position in the corner, his heart a dull weight in his chest, and tried to think things out. Exhaustion brought on merciful drowsiness, and Preston slept.

Sunshine was streaming into the jail car and a rough hand was shaking him when Preston next opened his eyes.

The pain in his head had increased to a dull, steady ache. He looked up to see three soldiers standing in the doorway of his cell. One of them had just finished locking a pair of huge iron fetters about his wrists, the cold contact of the metal sending goose pimples up his arms.

"All right, Preston. You've got just time to gulp down some coffee before we rustle you over to headquarters. Get up."

Preston blinked, shaking his head to clear it. Numbly he accepted a tin cup full of black coffee that a soldier thrust in his manacled hands. He gulped the unsweetened liquid and felt energy return as the strong coffee reached his stomach.

Through the barred window he saw Wagonwheel City. Next to the jail car were the gleaming tracks of the main line of the U. P. R., newly hewn ties turning yellow in the sun.

"Hurry along, Preston. You're already due at the court-martial. Hustle up."

Someone took the half-emptied coffee cup from his hands. The cowboy ducked mechanically to avoid hitting his head on the six-foot lintel of the cell door.

Rough hands escorted him out past rows of identical cells and down an iron step to the ground. The hot sunshine felt good, and he filled his lungs with the crisp morning air.

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He was marched at a rapid gait across a parade ground where a troop of crack horsemen were drilling, the American flag and regimental pennants whipping in the breeze.

Two minutes later he and his escorts followed a saber-clanking lieutenant up to a frame shack which flew a flag marked: "HEADQUARTERS BATTALION K, U. S. CAVALRY. LT. COLONEL FRANK SIRES, COMMANDING."

The cowboy was escorted indoors to find himself in a room filled with medal-bedecked officers belonging to the high command of the Wagonwheel City battalion of troops.

A stern-visaged man whom he heard addressed as Colonel Sires was seated at a polished desk, grim as a judge in a courtroom. An air of tension had filled the house at his entrance, and Quent felt the hairs on his neck prickle as he met a battery of staring eyes from all sides.

"You are Quent Preston?" demanded Colonel Sires, consulting some papers before him. "Very well—take the oath."

Preston mumbled as he was sworn in. He caught sight of Ellis Bayard, the pot-bellied land-office lawyer, seated among the spectators.

"You are being court-martialed this morning, Preston, on three serious charges," intoned the army commander. "The immediate charge, which caused your arrest last night, was the murder of Lige Morton, resident marshal."

Before Preston could snarl out a denial, Sires went on:

"There is also the matter of the death of one Linn dePerren on Tuesday last, at Major John Gorine's survey camp in Tomahawk Pass. There has also come to our attention the fact that you were responsible for the death of one Cyrus Trollen on the ninth of this month, here in Wagonwheel City."

Preston's heart sank in despair before the rapid-fire recital of charges against him. In his befuddled mental condition he had difficulty in remembering the names of DePerren and Trollen, let alone the circumstances linking him to their deaths.

"We will take up the matter of Lige Morton's death first, Preston. Do you plead guilty or not guilty to this charge?"

Preston shook his head dumbly.

"I didn't kill Morton. The last I remember, Boone Del—"

Colonel Sires slapped his desk with a gavel that resounded like a pistol shot.

"Very well—the prisoner pleads not guilty. We have three eyewitnesses to this killing: Attorney Ellis Bayard and Military Patrolmen Jack Tracy and George Kelly. Call Mr. Bayard to the stand, if you please, adjutant."

The hour that followed was a nightmare. Quent Preston's ears recorded the damning testimony of Ellis Bayard and the two army policemen who had taken him to jail, but the words meant nothing, only confused his already befuddled brain.

When the case concerning Lige Morton was disposed of, the matter of Linn dePerren's death was next brought up.

Staring at the floor, Preston listened to Colonel Sires read a letter which was signed by Major John Gorine.

"Major Gorine seems to be in some doubt as to whether or not Preston shot in self-defense in this DePerren case," said Colonel Sires. "However, we shall not call Major Gorine in from his survey camp, inasmuch as Preston has already

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been found guilty of the murder of Lige Morton last night."

Preston felt a tense flutter go around the room as Colonel Sires stood up, his eyes fixed on the cowboy's face.

"We will not tangle this court-martial with needless red tape regarding the two other murder charges against you, Preston. Before sentence is passed have you anything to say?"

The Texan shook himself out of his torpor and pressed iron-shackled hands to his aching temples.

He was conscious of the fact that disaster was engulfing him, yet he seemed powerless to clear his mind enough to protest his innocence.

"I'm not guilty—Colonel Sires," he finally gritted out. "If you could talk to Major Gorine, he could tell you—who's at the bottom of 'em. But I—"

Preston's voice trailed off into a whisper. His head was throbbing like a trip hammer and the room swam dizzily before his eyes.

As if from a great distance, he heard Colonel Sires' voice tolling like a knell of doom:

"—this court-martial having found you guilty as charged of the murder of Marshal Lige Morton, you will face a military firing squad tomorrow at sunrise. Court is adjourned!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### DEATH BY STABBING.

HELEN GORINE spent a sleepless night in her ill-ventilated room in the Irish Rose Hotel, a modest hostelry situated on the side street. She and her father selected this small hotel on their infrequent trips to end-of-track because it was away from the noisy bedlam of the main street.

Dawn found the girl washing her face and hands in a cracked bowl of icy water. Her toilet finished, she rapped lightly on the clapboard partition which adjoined her father's room, but got no response.

"It's early—I might as well let him sleep," she decided. "The court-martial isn't until eight."

Because it would be at least two hour before it would be necessary for her father to arise, Helen decided to take a walk and get some fresh air. Two hours of being cooped up in the tiny hotel room would do her frayed nerves no good.

She found Wagonwheel City quieter than she had ever seen it. Haggard-faced swampers were cleaning out saloons. Three times during her walk toward the springs, Helen had to avert her gaze from the grim spectacle of men carrying limp, unshrouded corpses toward the field of unmarked graves on the hillside.

The army of U. P. workmen—spikers, track gaugers, rail layers, tie-setters, gang foremen—were scrambling aboard the work train which would take them out to end-of-track, now fifteen miles west of Wagonwheel City.

Accompanying the work train was a long string of flatcars laden to capacity with blue-uniformed soldiers and their mounts, as protection against the ever-increasing threat of Indian attack.

The invisible menace of the Sioux had a sobering effect on everyone. Scouts had reported that the Indians were massing in the broken hills northwest of Wagonwheel City. The Indians might attack the railroad crews in overwhelming numbers at any moment.

At seven o'clock the girl turned back to the Irish Rose Hotel. There would be ample time to rouse her

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father, have breakfast in a restaurant—where fresh eggs cost fifty cents each, and a cup of stale coffee brought two bits—and get over to the army barracks in time to attend Quent Preston's hearing.

She paused at the door of her father's room and called his name. Receiving no reply, Helen knocked, softly at first, then louder as she got no response.

"I never knew him to sleep so soundly, poor dear," she muttered. "The trip must have tired him out and—"

She noted, with surprise, that the key was projecting from the door lock. This was unusual, for Major Gorine had always cautioned her to lock her room as protection against night prowlers and drunks, and he had always observed the same practice himself.

Swinging the door open, Helen's mouth was framed to call out a cheery greeting to awaken Major Gorine.

Instead, she caught a hand to her throat and gave a piercing scream which resounded in echo down the flimsy-walled hallway.

"Daddy—daddy—"

Major John Gorine lay on the bedroom cot, heavy-lidded eyes staring at the canvas ceiling. Both his hands were above the blankets, frozen there in the act of clutching the haft of a bowie knife which had been plunged to the hilt into the old surveyor's heart.

When the initial shock had passed, Helen collected herself with a supreme effort. For twenty of her twenty-four years her father had been her only living kin. She loved him with the passionate ardor that an only child can feel toward a kindly and understanding parent.

But her years on the wild frontier had given Helen a strength of will over her emotions which a city-bred woman of her own age would not have possessed. Therefore, she quelled the sob which tore at her throat and forced herself to cross the room and touch Major Gorine's forehead.

It was cold. Undoubtedly he had been dead many hours. Death from an unknown assassin's blade had probably occurred shortly after he and his daughter had retired.

Her scream summoned the owner of the hotel, a black-whiskered Irishman named Hennessy. With him were two wide-eyed charwomen, who blanched as they saw the tragic picture of Helen staring in mute horror at the corpse on the bed.

"Domn an' begorra!" cried Hennessy, entering the room and crossing himself. "Sure and what an evil reppitation my hoos will get if the town hears a mon loike Major Gorine was murthered as he shlept under my roof—"

Helen tore herself away, faced the opposite wall.

"Some robber, thinkin' he had money, don't yez believe, Moike?" asked one of the charwomen, covering the dead man's head with a quilt. "'Tis a baistly shame, thot it is—"

Helen took a deep breath, held her voice in control as she said: "No—no. It was deliberate murder. Someone wanted him dead. How—could anyone find out—this was daddy's room?"

The baldheaded old Irishman shrugged, avoiding the girl's pain-brightened eyes.

"Begorra, miss, it would be aisy-like to find oot where the major shlept, by lookin' in the register in the lobby—"

The pain of the ensuing hours was mercifully dimmed in the girl's

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memory by its sheer horror. Roughly sympathetic, the charwomen superintended the ghastly business of transferring the major's corpse to a tent on the east side of town where it would be prepared for burial by a renegade undertaker who was doing a flourishing business in the construction town.

Only then, when she could no longer be at her dead father's side, did the crushing realization that she was utterly alone in the world strike Helen Gorine's heart.

Leaving the undertaker's tent, she caught sight of a clock in a restaurant window. The hands pointed to 9:30. The shock of seeing how the morning had sped wrenched Helen out of her stupor of grief.

"Quent Preston—his trial was to be at eight—"

Oblivious to the leers of men on the street, Helen fled across town to the army barracks and was directed by a pacing sentry to the headquarters building.

There she learned that the morning's court-martial session had been over for a half-hour, and that four men had been condemned to meet death before a firing squad for sundry crimes.

"Was—one of the condemned—named Preston?" She braced herself so as not to flinch at the soldier's answer.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the aide de camp. "A cowboy named Preston shot up the town last night, killed the marshal."

"Where . . . where is he now?"

The aide de camp pointed across the drill ground toward a grim-looking red box car with barred windows on the railroad siding.

"That car with U. P. R. 1367 on its side, ma'am. Uh—you don't happen to be Mr. Preston's wife, by any cha—"

But she was gone, running across the deserted drill ground as fast as her legs could carry her. The car door was open, for ventilating purposes, and Helen Gorine was inside the car before a startled sentry threw down a book he had been reading and jumped up from his chair.

"Hey—you can't come in here—"

But Helen was already on her way to the cell at the end of the car, where she saw Quent Preston seated on a stool, staring moodily at the floor. He looked up as she reached the door, and a glad smile wiped off the blank despair in his face.

"Helen Gorine!" cried the Texan. "Did your—your father come with you from the Sioux Bonnets? He can get me out of this mess—"

Only then, as her hands grasped Preston's through the bars, did Helen Gorine break down. When her sobs had diminished, she choked out:

"Oh, Quent . . . my daddy . . . . was going to testify for you at the court-martial . . . but—"

"Shucks, miss," gruffed Preston as she choked into silence. "I don't reckon the major could have helped me much. Boone Delivan had enough killings chalked up to me to hang a dozen men, and he covered his tracks like a lobo wolf."

She lifted tear-streaming eyes to his.

"But daddy . . . was stabbed to death . . . last night. I'm positive . . . . it was to prevent him . . . from testifying against Boone Delivan!"

The heavy hand of the guard laid on the girl's shoulder before Preston could recover from the shock of her news.

"No visitors allowed to see the condemned men, miss. You better

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leave. It's agin' regulations to be in here—"

Quent's hands clung to the girl's, but the sentry pulled her toward the car door.

She flung a last glance over her shoulder at Quen Preston's ash-pale face behind the latticework, and then felt herself lifted unceremoniously to the ground.

"Listen," she said to the guard, as he started to apologize. "Tell me . . . the execution . . . where . . . when—"

The sentry dug his hobnailed boot into the dust.

"Usually the firing squads—do it in camp," he said awkwardly. "But we ain't got a fenced-off place here in Wagonwheel City, so the Old Man's give orders to hook a locomotive onto this jail car and drag it west of town about five miles."

"Where?" she queried, once more in control of her emotions.

"Well, out where the railroad cuts through Bitterroot Ridge, the orders read. But—ma'am—you ain't figuring to go out and witness—the shootin'—tomorrow, are you?"

Helen Gorine turned away and walked down the sidetrack until she was directly under the tiny barred window of Preston's cell.

"Quent!" she called, and saw the cowboy's face framed in the window overhead. "Quent—your horse—where is he stabled?"

Preston gulped hard and forced a grin.

"I'm glad you asked, Miss Gorine. Alamo's over in the Shamrock livery barn. I sort of wish—after tomorrow—you'd take care of old Alamo, miss. You love horseflesh, and he sorta—"

Helen moved away from the car as she saw the sentry coming in her direction, head cocked suspiciously.

"*Hasta la vista,* Quent!" she called enigmatically. "Isn't that how they say it down in Texas?"

Quent Preston watched her lithe figure vanish into the city of tents. Her farewell words had left an ironic sting.

*Adios,* he told himself bitterly, would have been a more appropriate word for Helen to have used. For "*hasta la vista*" was the way the Mexicans down on his native Rio Grande would say, "Good-by till we see each other again."

And there would be no future meeting for them, Preston figured, on this side of the Big Divide.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### DEATH AT SUNRISE.

THE black, foreboding hour just before dawn found Wagonwheel asleep the following day.

Swampers had emptied barrooms of the last drunk, sending them lurching on their way to gutters or their respective tents. Gambling-house wheels were idle after all-night roulette sessions.

Still a few minutes remained before the brassy notes of a bugle would rouse both the sleeping masses of railroad workers and their escorts, the United States troops.

Out on the siding which flanked the main line of the Union Pacific, a locomotive was panting out a volcano of smoke as the fireman stoked its grates with cordwood and the engineer eyed the dials registering his head of steam.

The locomotive was connected to the red jail car. Coupled behind the jail car was a flatcar with an inclined ramp sloping up from the ground.

Quent Preston had roused from sleep a half-hour before the puffing, stealthy approach of the locomotive,

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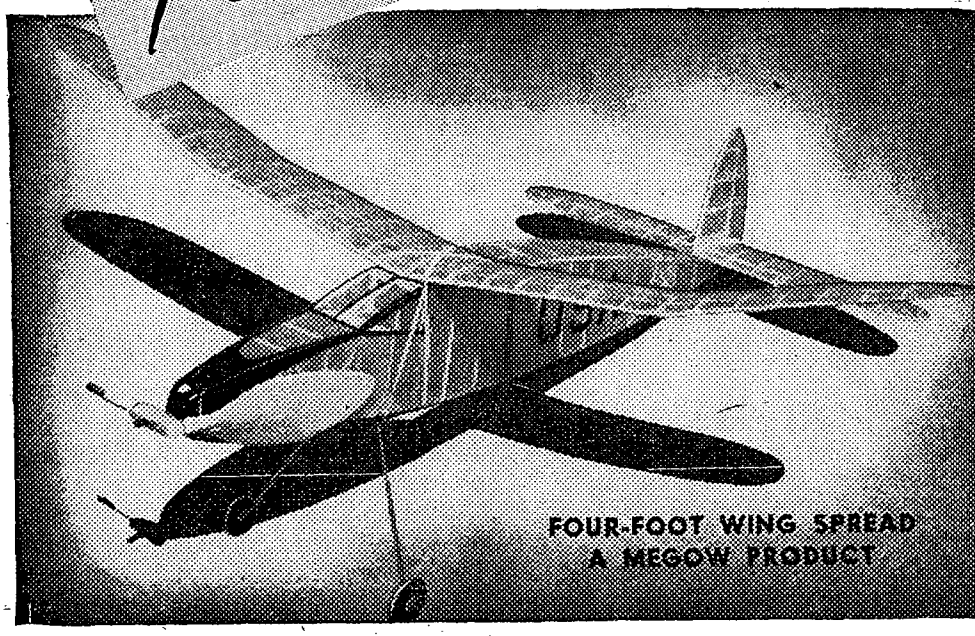


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*Continued from page 107*

and its jarring connection with the wheeled jail's coupling rods.

He had spent his last night on earth sleeping on the cold floorboards with only a single army blanket over him. What had awakened him was the panicked screams of two of the soldiers who had been sentenced to die that morning.

They were beating their cell bars in the maniacal fashion of doomed men afraid of eternity. They were staring out of barred windows, watching the Wyoming horizon to eastward as the stars were gradually banished before the advent of a rose-gray sunrise.

"Their damned shooting squad will be drawing a bead on us when that sun shows up!" sobbed one of the hysterical soldiers. "Why couldn't they have shot us yesterday—after court-martial—instead of doing everything according to damned rules and regulations—torturin' us!"

Preston rolled himself a smoke. Fear had not laid its icy clutches on the Texan's heart, though the firing squad was less than an hour away now. He had long since steeled himself to face his finish with jaw outthrust in defiance.

But a consuming sense of injustice kept his brow feverish. He wondered if Boone Delivan, who somehow had authored this fiendish travesty on justice, would be out there at Bitterroot Ridge to witness their execution.

He had not been permitted an audience with Colonel Sires the previous afternoon, when his head had cleared sufficiently for him to speak rationally. The court-martial's verdict was final, and Colonel Sires was too busy with the threat of Indian attacks to give a condemned cowboy a new hearing.

Besides, Delivan had covered his tracks far too well ever to be apprehended, Preston knew.

The stabbing of Major John Gorine lay like a heavy weight on Preston's heart. Indirectly, Gorine's death had been due to him, Preston. Like Helen, Preston had no doubts as to the motive back of the survey chief's murder. Boone Delivan had had to silence Major Gorine, come what may—

Preston had kept his face glued to the cell window all the previous day in hope of catching one more glimpse of Helen, possibly mounted astride Alamo, his claybank pony. But it had been a fruitless vigil.

"The firing squad's comin' across the parade grounds, men!" announced the third of the trio of condemned soldiers, who, like Preston, was awaiting his end with stony indifference. "Colonel Sires is leading 'em out here."

Preston could not see the twelve horsemen whom Colonel Sires had selected, probably by lot, to be executioners today. But he heard the clatter of steel-shod hoofs as the horses were ridden up the sloping wooden runway onto the flatcar.

Then Preston saw Colonel Sires walk past his side of the jail car, indistinct in the cold gray light, and mount into the engine cab.

"I guess we're ready, engineer," came the army commander's tired voice. "Let's get this nasty business over with."

Without clang of bell or blast of whistle, the death-bound train got in motion. Drive wheels clattered over frogs at the main-line switch; Wagonwheel City glided past in the semidarkness.

Indistinctly, Preston saw the dark blot of the cottonwood trees overhanging Wagonwheel Springs. He tried to forget the time he and his

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father had camped there, on their way to Tomahawk Pass.

The train gathered speed, the snorting of its exhaust thrown back in taunting echoes of farewell by the logged-off hillside to the north, the hillside from whose summit the Prestons had first glimpsed the construction camp.

Sagebrush and dwarf piñons swam past in an ever-increasing blur as the locomotive gathered speed. A curve in the tracks shut Wagonwheel City from view and gave Preston a glimpse of the dozen rifle-armed cavalrymen who were huddled with their horses on the flatcar behind.

Smoke and cinders beat through his cell window. The rattle of trucks over rail joints helped muffle the laments of the two doomed men, Bates and Seiden.

Preston grinned wryly at the soldier named Leacock as he passed tobacco and papers through the adjoining bars.

"They don't do things up brown in the army out here at the edge of nowhere, do they?" commented Leacock. "We didn't even get a breakfast into our bellies, they're so anxious to get us lined up before that shootin' squad."

Preston drew at his own cigarette and kept his face framed in the barred window. The biting air was clean and cold and good in his nostrils, and he wanted to fill his lungs to the utmost with the beloved fragrance of sage and wild rose. He wondered if heaven, wherever that was, could be half so fair as these frontier open spaces.

A gray light was revealing the distant snow-covered Sioux Bonnets. A mile post scampered past. Two of them. A third—

Bitterroot Ridge was in sight now. The big yellow shale cut banks would be the backstop for the executioners' bullets. Colonel Sires would hurry the grim ordeal, for the death train had to get back to the Wagonwheel siding in time to clear the tracks for the troop train and work trains which would be going out to end-of-track shortly after daybreak.

The clamoring of the condemned men increased as the locomotive throttle was shut off and the train began coasting, losing speed.

The eastern horizon was aflame now; five more minutes would see the sun bursting in all its glory over the Wyoming terrain. That dawning sun would usher four souls into eternity.

The locomotive gave a short whistle to warn the cavalrymen on the flatcar to brace themselves for a stop. Two hundred yards ahead loomed the yellowish V of Bitterroot Ridge cut.

Brakes squealed on drive wheels, and, with a jangle of iron couplings, the train came to a stop that was followed by a fatigued sigh of steam from the engine's cylinder cocks.

Preston saw the wooden gangplank shoved out again—and then the twelve uniformed troopers led their mounts down the cleated incline. After the death train had returned to Wagonwheel City, these soldiers would later mount the westward-bound troop train.

The jail-car door opened, flooding the gloomy interior with rose-tinted light. Bates and Seiden stiffened in their cages as Colonel Sires swung up from the ground. Leacock and Preston drew at their cigarettes in seeming indifference.

"The executions will be singly," clipped the army commander to the two sentries inside the car. "We

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will take the prisoners in the following order: Seiden, Leacock, Bates, Preston."

The mounted firing squad hobbled their ponies and lined up facing the slope of the cut. The sentries unlocked Seiden's cell and dragged the screaming soldier out to the shale bank.

Two minutes later, as the sun peeped its golden rim over the eastern hills, a sharp rattle of musketry rang out over the empty prairie.

When Quent's eyes were once more drawn toward the embankment a hundred yards away, it was to see gun smoke dissolving in the crisp air and a huddled figure at the base of the slope.

In ghastly succession, Leacock and Bates followed, the former flicking his cigarette butt aside and reminding Preston to join him with a glass of the devil's brew in hell.

Left alone with a single guard inside the jail car, Quent Preston tried to settle his taut nerves by looking out the window toward the west, in the hopes that his beloved Tomahawk Pass would be his last sight on earth. But the intervening shoulder of Bitterroot Ridge cut off even that slight comfort.

Then, even as the shot rang out which sent the cringing Bates into eternity, Quent Preston caught sight of a lone figure emerging from a thicket of wild aspen near the U. P. right of way.

Sunlight flashed on the polished barrel of a rifle in the figure's grasp. The oncomer was headed for the cab of the locomotive, unnoticed by the firing squad in the distance.

Quent Preston's jaw dropped on an oath as he saw wind-blown chestnut hair fluttering back from a hard-set, resolute face.

It was Helen Gorine!

## CHAPTER XX.

### SPURRING THE IRON HORSE.

WITH masculine stride the girl walked toward the red-painted cab of the locomotive. The engineer and fireman were pretending to be busy with gauges and firebox, to avoid looking out to where three bodies lay side by side in the dirt.

The first intimation the engine crew had of Helen's arrival was the sound of her light step on the iron ladder entering the cab.

They turned—to look into the muzzle of a .30-30 carbine.

"Get this train started!" ordered Helen Gorine, her voice cold and deadly. "Move—*fast!*"

With a startled grunt the Union Pacific hoghead released his brakes and pulled out the throttle bar.

Smoke erupted with a violent snort from the funnel-shaped stack. Drive wheels churned on the rails. Then the death train lunged forward into Bitterroot Cut, belching sparks and smoke.

Lieutenant Colonel Sires spun about from the gruesome task of making sure the last squad victim was dead and yelled in dismay as he saw the train puff into the cut of the ridge, empty flatcar and red-painted jail car gliding behind it.

The twelve troopers, white-faced from their ordeal, could only stand in stupefied amazement as the train vanished around the curving rails.

Helen Gorine planted herself in the cab door, her rifle following the trembling fireman as he brought a load of cordwood from the jouncing tender.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone," she called out above the roar of the engine exhaust. "But get up speed, Mr. Hoghead! You'll stop when I tell you to!"

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The engineer glanced over his shoulder and retorted:

"You'll catch hell for this, lady. End-of-track is only eleven miles up the line, so you'd better think fast!"

Helen clung to a hand rail and peered up the track.

"See that lodgepole pine grove up ahead?" she shouted. "Stop alongside those trees."

The engineer reduced speed, finally grated to a steam-blowing halt alongside the grove of trees bordering the right of way.

"Now, get out!" ordered Helen Gorine as they turned to face her once more. "Start walking due south—and don't try anything funny while you're in rifle range. I can use this gun."

The jumper-clad trainmen made haste to obey the girl's command. Not until they were a hundred yards distant from the roadbed did Helen descend from the engine cab.

She jerked rifle to shoulder as she saw the startled jail-car guard walking up the track side to determine the cause of their unscheduled run toward end-of-track.

Sight of a lone girl, instead of the engine crew, completely unnerved the guard.

"Drop that pistol!" cried Helen Gorine. "Now, get back inside that car! Obey orders and you won't get hurt."

The trembling guard scrambled up into the jail car, eyes wide with terror. Helen Gorine followed him, rifle poised defensively as the guard turned to face her with uplifted arms.

"Don't shoot, ma'am!" he begged piteously. "I got a fam—"

"Unlock Preston's cell!"

"But—ma'am—I'd be shot for treason if I let a pris—"

*"Open that cell!"*

The guard jumped to do her bidding. A moment later Quent Preston, a wide grin on his face, emerged from his iron-barred cage. Whipping the ring of keys from the guard's hand, he locked the quaking sentry inside the cell.

"That'll take care of him, Helen," drawled the Texan as the two jumped to the ground.

"Get started, Quent," she panted. "Your horse and mine are picketed in a draw over that hill yonder. Hurry!"

Quent Preston headed off across the rock-strewn prairie, while Helen stooped to peer under the jail car. She saw the engineer and fireman still running to the southward of the abandoned locomotive, well out of rifle range but still obeying orders.

Pausing only long enough to pick up the guard's army pistol, Helen set out after Quent Preston. She overtook him at the foot of the hillside, flushed and panting.

"The soldiers will be coming," she gasped. "Hurry—"

Preston grabbed her left hand and together they scaled the gentle slope until they were at the summit. A mile to the east they could see the firing squad riders galloping up the tracks toward the stalled train.

"Helen," panted the cowboy, "I never saw—the like—of this. How'd you manage—to get Alamo?"

She adjusted the chin strap of her Stetson, and, for the first time in twenty-four hours, the tense muscles of her face relaxed.

"I told the man—at the livery barn—I was your sister," she laughed. "Brought the horses—up here—last night. Spent the night—waiting at Bitterroot Cut—died a thousand deaths for fear—Colonel Sires would change the place and that Colonel Sires would change the order of execution that I found out he planned."

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Having recovered their wind, the two fugitives headed down the south slope. In a dry coulee a hundred yard below, Preston came upon his claybank pony, tethered in a patch of grass alongside Helen Gorine's leggy sorrel mustang.

"Just what," wheezed the cowboy as they dragged saddles aboard their mounts, "do we do next? I'm sort of mixed up like—"

She shrugged, busy putting a split-ear headstall over her mount's head.

"The only place—I can call home—is daddy's survey camp," she said. "But Quent—I've got to get back—to Wagonwheel City—when they bury dad—"

They swung into saddle, Helen booting her rifle and handing Preston the railway guard's .45-caliber revolver.

"Listen, Helen," said the Texan as they spurred off down the sloping ravine stirrup by stirrup, "we've got to think fast. I'll head for Tomahawk Pass and see you after things blow over. You—ride back to the railroad tracks. Colonel Sires won't court-martial a girl, the daughter of his old friend. Explain everything—he'll let you go back to town."

They reined up, man and girl locking glances for a long moment.

And in that fateful look Quent Preston realized with shocking suddenness that this sun-bronzed girl, so much a part of the wild frontier, was a part of him—something he could never give up, something vital to his future.

But there was no hint of his stabbing emotion in the handclasp he gove the girl.

"*Hasta la vista*, Helen," he smiled. "No use—tryin' to thank you for all this—when we're in such a hurry. I don't reckon I'll ever catch up thanking you, after today. *Adios!*"

She smiled, her eyes clinging to his.

"So long, Quent. I'd do it again—for you—any day."

He reined westward and spurred savagely so that she would not see his twitching face and guess what lay behind his torrent of emotions. When he had gained the west ridge of the ravine he turned to wave at the girl who was climbing back toward the ridge crest on her way to the railroad.

His shout of farewell turned into a hoarse yell of horror.

For Preston's sun-squinted eyes recoiled before the heart-freezing vision of twenty-odd riders who appeared on the skyline, like teeth on a comb, in close-ranked formation on the eastern spur of the ravine.

"Indians!"

Morning sun rays gleamed off coppery, naked backs. To Quent's horrified ears came the awful whoop of Sioux death cries as the two dozen warriors, riding bareback on fleet Indian ponies, swept down the opposite side of the ravine toward Helen Gorine.

There was no time for her to gain the top of the hill. She caught sight of the Indians who bore down upon her at the same instant that Quent Preston spun his horse about and raced down in her direction.

Frantically the girl tried to wave him back as she bent over her saddle and headed her sorrel toward the dry wash.

Smoke puffs came from Indian guns. Bullets kicked up dirt in front of Quent Preston's horse, peppered the ground on all sides of Helen Gorine's sorrel.

Then, with an oath of dismay, Quent Preston saw the girl's mustang falter, hard hit by Indian slugs.

Before it had traveled a dozen

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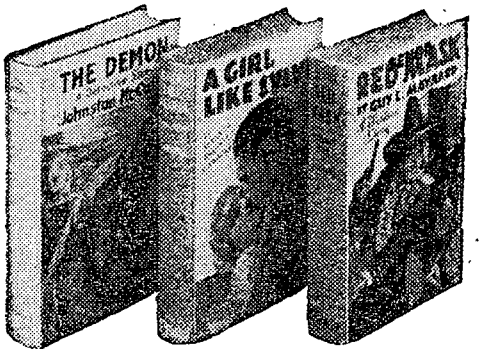


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yards, Helen Gorine's mount toppled, mortally wounded.

Roweling Alamo to the peak of the Texas horse's limit of speed, Quent Preston sped down the hill as he saw Helen leap free of her falling horse.

An arrow zipped across the V-shaped trough of the ravine and imbedded itself in Alamo's withers, causing the claybank to squeal piteously and break its rhythmic stride.

Preston tore the flint-headed arrow out of his horse's flesh with his left hand, while the right cocked the .45 army pistol.

Then he was skidding Alamo to a dusty halt and leaning far out from saddle to encircle Helen Gorine in the powerful crook of his left arm.

"My horse—fell on top of rifle—couldn't save it," she gasped, swinging astride Alamo's saddle cantle behind Preston. "But Quent—you shouldn't have come back—impossible for us to both make it—carrying double—"

In a flurry of dust and screaming bullets, Preston wheeled Alamo and headed for the west slope. But already the whooping Indian band had divided, ten yowling riders plunging across the pit of the ravine and riding out on the western slope to cut off their escape.

Preston reined downhill, but saw a flying line of naked Sioux warriors closing up that route. Behind him were more Indians, their bows twanging as they sent arrows swarming down in a lethal hail upon the encircled couple.

"We're surrounded, Helen," gasped Preston. "No chance for both of us—you get in saddle—try to make top of hill—"

Preston's cry was cut short as a Sioux arrow knocked him from saddle and landed him, face down, on the ground, the arrow quivering from his back muscles like a plucked fiddle string.

Helen Gorine flung herself from the horse, dragging the pony's reins as she headed back toward the fallen cowboy. Even as she did so the war-bonneted chief of the Indian band flashed by, hurling a feather-hung tomahawk straight at the girl's skull.

It was Alamo, Preston's claybank cow pony that saved Helen Gorine's life in the clock-tick of time which followed.

The pony, rearing back to avoid collision with the war chief's oncoming mount, jerked so violently on the reins which the girl had looped about her left wrist that it halted her rush and knocked her off her feet.

The hard-flung tomahawk sped past the spot which an instant before had been occupied by Helen's skull and caromed off a rock with a splintering of its wooden handle.

Staggering to her knees, Helen Gorine crawled to Preston's side as the wounded Texan propped himself off the ground with one elbow and fumbled groggily at the embedded arrow in his back.

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"Quent—don't—oh, Quent—"

Luckily, the sharp flint arrowhead had entered his body at an angle and had deflected along a rib, otherwise it would have embedded itself, heart-deep, through the cowboy's lung.

Wincing, Preston snapped off the arrow's shaft several inches above the blood-spurting wound under his buckskin shirt. He well knew the uselessness of trying to wrench the barbed obsidian point out of his flesh. That would require a knife.

Throwing the feather-tipped shaft of the arrow aside, Preston groped in the dust for the Colt .45 which had been jarred from his grasp when he was knocked from horseback.

Cocking the hammer with a thumb, the Texan drew aim at the paint-bedaubed Sioux chief when the savage, realizing that his tomahawk had missed its target, skidded his pony to a halt and raced back toward the spot where the white man and woman crouched in the swirling dust.

The chief's eagle-feathered war bonnet bannered in the wind behind him as he charged up, shifting a rifle from his left hand to his right for a close-range shot.

Lining his revolver sights on the Indian's hideous visage, Preston squeezed trigger. Through belching gun smoke he saw the Sioux lurch backward on his horse, head drilled by a slug.

Then the slain chief toppled over the rump of his galloping mount, landing with a heavy impact not fifty feet from where Preston knelt.

Again Preston fired, this time sending his high-calibered slug into the brisket of the Sioux's horse before it could run him and Helen down with flailing hoofs.

The pony collapsed, rolling over with threshing legs pointed skyward, then sagged over on its side a scant six feet away.

The other Indians were galloping in a tightening circle about the ravine, closing it swiftly on their doomed quarry.

Seizing Helen's arm, Quent Preston crawled rapidly forward and bore her down behind the scant shelter of the dead animal. Billowing dust was their only protection now.

Through the sifting screen of alkali particles, the two could see the screeching warriors riding in closer, holding their fire as they tightened their ring of doom.

"It'll be a short fight," muttered Preston. "But we'll take a few Injuns with us—"

Resting his pistol barrel across the Indian pony's carcass, Preston triggered the .45 a third time, saw a yowling Sioux brave hurl up his arms and topple off his bareback pony, to lay kicking amid a boulder nest, a bullet lodged in his groin.

Quent Preston swabbed perspiration out of his eyes with a buckskin sleeve and raised his head above the level of the dead horse's barrel for a glance around. Their lot was clearly hopeless, surrounded and outnumbered as they were.

A dozen savages were approaching from the rear, veering toward the chief's corpse.

Fifty feet away, in the open, was the dead chief's carbine; but Preston knew it would be impossible to get the rifle without being cut down by a hail of slugs.

He jacked open the Colt in his hands. Only two bullets remained in the chambers; the other cartridges were empty.

Two slugs—enough, he reasoned grimly, to put Helen and himself beyond the threat of a Sioux torture stake.

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Trying to close his brain against the horror of what he must do, Preston snapped the cylinder back into its frame, spun it into place.

He turned to Helen Gorine, who was still clinging to Alamo's bridle reins. A fearsome look was in the cowboy's glance as he met the girl's eyes.

Horror was mirrored there, but this stanch daughter of the frontier was showing courage under fire as they faced inevitable doom.

"Helen," choked the Texan, "you know—how Sioux treat white women they take prisoner."

She nodded, eyes clogged with tears.

"Then—forgive me—and God forgive me—for doing this!"

Before the girl could divine the meaning of his choked words, Quent Preston pressed the gun muzzle against Helen's heart, shut his eyes against the horror to come, and pulled trigger—

**Is there a way out? Did Quent pull that trigger when help was in sight? Will he spend the rest of his hunted life regreeting Helen's death? Read next week's Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly for thrilling answers to these questions!**

## QUIÉN SABE

### TEXAS RANGERS NAMED THE SIX-SHOOTER

In the successful outcome of Samuel Colt's new weapon, Texas played an important part. When the effective little gun that bears Colt's name made its first appearance it was not received with favor by the army. Such unfavorable reports of the new firearm were given by army officers that Samuel Colt did not get an order from the government. This was a great disappointment, as he had counted upon the support of the army to help him build his business.

However, the new Republic of Texas came to the rescue. Texas Rangers had found the new weapon of great advantage in their campaigns on horseback against the plains Indians. Ranger Captain Walker visited Colt and suggested changes, which the inventor made, and called it the "Walker pistol." Captain Walker gave it his full approval, and large orders poured in from Texas. It was the Texans who gave it the name of the "six-shooter," and the name has stuck to this day.

The Rangers had found themselves at a disadvantage in their encounters with Indians, for the arrows came their way much faster than the Texans could reload their one-shot guns. But when Captain Jack Hays, one of the grandest Rangers that ever lived, placed the six-shooter in the hands of his company of frontiersmen, they soon got the upper hand of the Indians.

The redmen were stunned when they found that one white man could send twelve shots into their ranks without stopping to reload. Captain Jack covered himself with glory, and Texas helped Samuel Colt by proving to the world the qualities of his invention.

The insistence of the Texas Rangers to be armed with six-shooters caused the government to place large orders with Samuel Colt, and this hastened the enormous success that the Colt has enjoyed ever since.

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# LEGENDS OF SUPERSTITION MOUNTAINS

LEGENDS of lost gold mines hidden in the Superstition Mountains have drawn many prospectors to Arizona —some of them to death. Eighty miles north of Tucson rises the mountain range whose appeal to the adventurous has a mysterious lure that is irresistible. Some of the men who entered the mountain passes with the hope of discovering a vein of gold that would give them sudden wealth were never seen again. Months, and sometimes years, passed before their tragic fate became known, or rather guessed at, when their skeletons were found in lonely spots.

Bullet holes in the skulls of some of these skeletons, made from behind the victims, told plainly that they had been shot down by mountain marksmen, of whom no trace was ever found. Others bore no marks of violence, but rusty canteens, long empty, told that they had died by the slow and agonizing process of thirst. Caches of food were found at various points in the mountains, but never a sign of water that alone could sustain life.

The Indians, too, have weird legends of the Superstitions. There was a time when these mountains were a safe refuge, when enemy tribes were at war. Large caves, with rock-covered holes for entrance and exit, have been unearthed by accident. A large number of warriors could hide in some of the larger caves, while the enemy walked past, or over, the hide-out. On this account the Indians regarded the Superstition Mountains as a blessing to the red race, but believed that they were a curse to the white race because it was the greed for gold only that attracted white men to the unknown passes of the range.

There is a story that, for many years in the remote past, the dreaded Apaches used to swoop down and strike with lightning suddenness at unsuspecting rival tribes. It is said that when a large band of Pima Indians sought refuge from this dreaded enemy in a cave the entire band was wiped out by the ruthless destroyer.

The pinnacles that stand in a jagged line along the southern rimrock represent people who disobeyed their deities, according to the legend. They were turned to stone and were doomed to stand there for all time as a lesson to rebellious tribes. From the highest wall in the range a tragedy was enacted when a whole tribe leaped to death rather than submit to the indignity of a surrender, which they knew would mean slavery.

The most modern fact relates that the last nine white men who tried to solve the secrets of the Superstitions met with violent death. This has increased the fear that is constantly in the minds of the Indians. In prehistoric times the range was a haven for a people that wished to live peaceably, and to cultivate such land as could be utilized for agriculture. They may have had other pursuits, but there is no evidence of them today. All through the mountain canyons and in the small sheltered valleys of the range, evidences are found of a permanent occupation by a large population, and of agricultural activities. But the people themselves disappeared completely, leaving no other traces of their presence in the region.

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# THE WRANGLERS CORNER

**The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from amateur writers.**

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**All published material will be paid for at good space rates.**

**Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned.**

**Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.**

LAST week, an old cowboy sent us a true Western experience that we're saving to use later. It was scrawled in pencil on the cheapest paper you can buy in a cow town. It was misspelled, wrong words used, and a fly that had tumbled into a bottle of ink could have strolled across it and punctuated it better. But by this time, said cowboy has probably spent the check we sent him for it.

What of it? Well, this is just a reminder that you've got the same chance to do likewise. What we started to talk about, though, was the cowboy's letter. Here 'tis:

"This true Western experience is the closest shave I ever had, so it's the last one I'll write. I'm not quitting writing, though. The next thing you can expect from me is a made-up story."

We're plumb anxious to see that "made-up" story, but we aren't looking forward to rewriting it. The cowboy is handicapped by almost no education at all. The chances are that he knows nothing of story construction. We can hear you saying that the kindest thing we could do would be to tell our old amigo to forget this new ambition of his.

Are we going to do that? We are not! We're gambling on that old cowpoke to get into the Corner yet, whatever his handicap may be. He must know plenty of good Western characters. He has enthusiasm and more fight in him than a barrel of wild cats. It all goes back to the old saying that you can't keep a good man down. The same goes for you, pards.

Now here's this week's true Western experiences as recalled by other old-timers:

## WHEN DOCILE R'ARED UP

By H. E. Dorsett—Age 60

Portland, Oregon

When I was a boy of fourteen, I lived with my folks on a little ranch in Colorado. Our nearest neighbor was a rancher known as Tight Ward, and for pure orneriness and meanness, that jasper took the blue ribbon in a walk. He was so cussed, his hands never stayed with him long enough to cash more than two monthly pay checks.

That is, all but one patient, sweet-tempered waddy named Docile Weed, who took it on the chin plenty, but stuck to Tight through thick and thin. He was then Tight's only puncher, for Tight had discovered that Docile could do most of

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the work without a whimper, so he economized.

"Docile's a top hand if there ever was one," I'd heard my father say. "If Tight crowds him too much, I've got plenty of room for him on my spread."

I had a fine little saddle horse and rode to Tight's spread to visit Docile now and then. He was always glad to see me, but Tight looked at me out of the corners of his rat eyes as if I were costing him the pennies he paid for Docile's time on ranch chores.

One day, I found Tight in a corral with a wild-eyed bronc snubbed to the post, the first step in breaking a horse.

"He's breakin' hosses hisself now," Docile told me with a sigh and a doleful expression on his long face. "The reg'lar hoss wrangler used to do it, but he quit. Thar he goes!"

Tight let the rope go loose and went up into the saddle with almost the same motion. There was no doubt that he had been a smart bronc-stomper in his day, but now he was a little overweight and not so nimble as he used to be. To offset this, the bronc wasn't such a bad one as it might have been. A broncbuster worthy of the title would have topped it pronto and called for more.

But Tight got jounced and jolted with the cayuse's first buck-jump, and the seat of his pants took terrific punishment right up to the last one. His head bobbed back and forth as if it would fly off his shoulders. Roaring sulphurous oaths, he yanked off his Stetson and slapped the buckskin cayuse's flanks with it.

"Yuh son of a ——" he hollered.

Hé left the saddle and went flying over the buckskin's ears. He hit the ground with a crash that would have broken any ordinary man in two.

Docile went over the corral rails like a lanky squirrel. I was right behind him.

The horse stood to one side, blowing through its flaring nostrils and frisking its tail. Tight lifted his head, blinked a few times and leaped to his feet, the maddest hombre I ever laid eyes on. He dashed to the cayuse and kicked it resoundingly in the belly. Then he pulled out his Colt, his beady eyes insane with fury.

"Damn yuh, I'll shoot yuh, yuh—" he raged.

Docile reached him in a bound and knocked the six-gun from his hand. Then he drove his fist into his boss' chin with a wallop that stretched him flat on the ground.

"Thet's fer abusin' an animal thet beat yuh in a game yuh both played," said Docile. "I kin stand anything but an hombre hurtin' a hoss."

"You're fired, damn yuh!" bellowed Tight when he came to.

"Thet suits me fine," said Docile.

"My dad wants to see you, Docile," I told him. "I think you'd better bring your warbag."

He brought it, and it stayed with him in our bunkhouse for years. As far as I know, he never r'ared up again. Years later, he bought Tight Ward's spread after Tight died and it was on the auction block.

Good for Docile! We're sure glad that your dad gave him the job, Señor Dorsett. In our time, we've known plenty of waddies who'd have handed Tight the same dose of medicine he got. If anything riles a cowpoke, it's to see an hombre mistreat a cayuse. A real Westerner just can't understand how a rancher could do it, even if he is a mean, ornery cuss.

There, you folks who've had true Western experiences, now that you've read a few, they don't look so hard to scribble down on paper, do they? Remember, we'll dress 'em up if they need rewriting. Come on with 'em, cowboys and cowgals! Round 'em up! Your amigos on the 3W spread want to read 'em.

Here's another true experience:

## MY FIRST SHOOT-OUT

**By Leland Milgurn—Age 55**

**Los Angeles, California**

Years ago, when I started work as a cowhand back in Montana, the news reached my boss that Bad-eye Polin had been sighted heading our way. This Bad-eye hombre was a cold-blooded killer, and the mention of his name was enough to send chills down my spine. His mean hatchet face, with its little slits of eyes, was enough to give a young waddy like me a nightmare from just seeing it on reward posters.

Then one day the sheriff came riding up with a posse. "Bad-eye Polin is holed up over in the canyon," he sang out to the

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Old Man. "I want you and your boys to go with us."

The Old Man was a pious gent and a whooper-up for law and order, so we all saddled up and rode with the posse. You can imagine how important I felt to be one of the posse going out to get a killer dead or alive. Somebody stood a good chance of getting rich out of it, too; the rewards offered for Bad-eye added up to over five thousand dollars.

In the canyon, we all spread out after getting off our horses. A scout had located the killer hiding in a jumble of rocks, and had swapped a few bullets with him.

"Close in on him slow," the sheriff ordered. "Keep down low. Remember it's no greenhorn kid you're after."

With my six-gun in my hand, I prowled cautiously ahead to the rocks that led up to the killer's hiding place. I never was so scared in my life. My heart hammered so loud, I was sure Bad-eye could hear it. I was gooseflesh all over. There were a few scrub oaks to hide me, but much of the time I was in the open.

I had lost track of the rest of the posse, and supposed they were on both sides of me, sneaking up just as carefully as I was sneaking. There was a big rock ahead. I catfooted to it and looked around its edge. And there—

It was Bad-eye, crouching just as I was crouching, six-gun in hand! Bad-eye, unmistakable, just as I had seen him pictured on reward posters!

I don't exactly remember what happened next. I have a hazy recollection of being told by a wee small inner voice that I had to do something fast, and that I had the instrument in my hand to do it with.

A deafening explosion thundered in my ears. A jerk on my arm as my six-gun recoiled woke me up to the fact that it had made half of that explosion.

Members of the posse swarmed around me, shouting: "Where is he?" "Who'd you shoot at?"

"Bad-eye Polin," I replied sheepishly, "I —I must have missed him."

"Must have!" the sheriff mocked me. "You know damned well you did. Now he's gone, and-Lord knows what kind of a gun trap we'll walk into. Well, boys, spread out, and we'll try it again."

That's what we did, but my heart wasn't in it now. I felt more like riding far away from that country. I'd never hear the last of it.

A shout rose from below, then another. I ran down. Several cowboys stood around a body that lay on the ground. It was Bad-eye Polin, shot just enough to one

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side of the heart to keep him alive a little while before he died.

The rewards? Well, not so good. I knew darned well that I'd killed Bad-eye, but there were no witnesses to prove it. Some even said that Bad-eye had killed himself, seeing that the law would get him and hang him anyway. Yes, it was my first and last shoot-out with a bad man, and it seems that I should have got some reward for it. But the way I look at it, I *did* get my reward. I'm still alive.

And here's a made-up story:

### VENGEANCE TRAIL

By Edward Wolter—Age 24
St. Paul, Minnesota

Walking their horses up to the livery stable of the Lone Star Hotel, two saddle-weary cowboys dismounted with a sigh. Shorty Travers and Lonny Graves, although as different as day and night, had been pards ever since they were kids down on the Rio Grande.

"Shore was a dry ride. Guess I'll ankle over to the Alamo Saloon thar and wet my whistle," said the sawed-off red-haired runt as he whacked the dust from his Stetson and hitched up his gun belt.

"Comin' along, Lonny?" he asked the tall, well-built, smooth-faced boy standing beside him.

"Reckon I will. Maybe I'll run into thet jasper what bushwhacked my dad," answered the gray-eyed Lonny, his jaw jutting dangerously.

"I shore hopes yuh does, Lonny," mourned Shorty. "Every time we gets near thet rat he fades away and we loses him. I hopes yuh dots his eyes so I can settle down and get some rest."

Striding up to the saloon, they shouldered their way through the swinging doors and pushed up to the bar.

"Quit shovin', younker; there's plenty room," snarled a rough voice in Shorty's ear, and he turned and looked into a pair of green, bloodshot eyes set in a scarred leathery face.

"I ain't shovin' nobody, mister. Does yuh own this part of the bar?"

"Maybe I does, and maybe I doesn't, but quit shovin'."

Quick as a flash, Lonny stepped in between the two quarreling men and spoke quietly: "Don't rile my pard, mister. He's poison when yuh cross him. Shorty, get down off yore high horse," he ordered the redhead.

"Well, tell the old goon to leave me be."

But Lonny was no longer listening to him. Staring intently at the bearded highbinder's left hand, he voiced a request:

"Thet shore is an odd ring yuh got there, cowboy. Mind if I take a look at it?"

"Why, no, sonny, just so long as yuh don't pawn it for a drink," and the green-eyed waddy laid the ring before Lonny.

Lonny looked closely at it, then stepped into a clear spot away from the crowd.

"Yo're the murderin' polecat what dry-gulched my dad and I'm callin' on yuh to draw yore hoglaig!" His voice rang above the din in the saloon.

"Why, yuh ornery little pup, I'll kill yuh for thet," and the hard-bitten cowpoke went into action.

Colts flicked from holsters as the cowboys at the bar dived for safety.

*Bang!* Lonny's Peacemaker spoke once.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Three shots ripped into the floor as the scar-faced hombre's finger closed convulsively on the trigger, and he fell, a round hole in his forehead.

"Gents, this buzzard murdered my dad, Joe Graves," Lonny said. "The ring he was wearing proves it. This ring was made for my dad by a telegraph operator. The proof is on the inside."

The cowboy who looked at it whistled softly. "I know something about telegraphy," he said. "This ring has the name Joe Graves on the inside in Morse Code. Thet fool was wearing his own death warrant and didn't know it!"

There, now, we call that a plumb good little story! It has good characters who are vitalized through their conversation. Natural dialogue that isn't forced does more to put life into a story than any tricks of explanation and description. Everybody likes to read what people say.

The plot is a good one, with action leading to the shoot-out climax, which is followed by the punch of exposing the trick that Lonny held up his sleeve all the time.

We sure advise you to keep on writing, Señor Wolter. We've got a hunch that it'll pay you more dividends some day.

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Here's another story:

### ROBBER'S REWARD

By William H. Wilson—Age 20
Hobenwald, Tennessee

The night was dark and it had begun to rain, when Bob Callinger rode into the yard of his little Circle C Ranch. As he dismounted, he saw, revealed by a flash of lightning, a man standing under a tree off to the right of the house. The man was clad in a wide-brimmed hat, pulled low over his brows, and a slicker. When Bob approached him he fled into a nearby mesquite thicket.

Although Bob was curious to know what the man was doing around his ranch, especially since he had seemed so shy, he soon put the matter from his mind and went about his work. After caring for his horse, he went about making preparations for his supper.

But he was soon to pay for his carelessness. He was washing dishes when he heard footsteps behind him. Turning around he found himself looking into the bore of a .45 held by a hairy giant, whom he immediately recognized by pictures he had seen on reward posters as Joe Bissom, an outlaw who specialized in robbing ranches, and who often left his victims dead so that they were not able to get a posse after him.

"I'm takin' what money you got here and your horses, an' leavin' you so you won't git no posse after me," the outlaw said with a mocking grin.

Bob believed that the outlaw would do just what he had said he would do if he could, and it looked as if he was in a position to do anything he liked. But Bob thought differently about it. If he could help it, this outlaw wasn't going to take his horses and money, nor was he, Bob, going to die without putting up a fight.

So, betting everything on one card, he looked past the outlaw and began to smile, showing confidence that he by no means felt. The outlaw showed surprise, but didn't look around, as Bob had hoped he would do.

Retaining his smile, however, Bob made another attempt. "You outlaws think you are smart, don't you? Well, that's where you're wrong. When you get to thinking you can't be caught, you get careless, and —" He broke off.

The outlaw had stood all of this that he could. This young man looked too confident as he looked past him at the door. He thought that there must be someone back there.

He took just one little glance around at the door, but that little glance was all Bob wanted.

Bob was upon him by the time the outlaw's eyes left him. The two men wrestled for possession of the gun. They went down together, and in the fall the gun was lost. The rest of the fight was hand to hand. The men came to their feet, and slugged until the outlaw went down and failed to come up.

Next morning when Bob rode into town, he was not alone. On another horse was Joe Bissom, the notorious outlaw. He didn't look at all dangerous, however, as he rode along to the county jail.

The best we can say about this story is that it has good suspense. In plot and situations, it is only an ordinary Western yarn, well written, but not a stand-out among the best stories sent in by our amateurs. It rises to a shoot-out climax, and then sort of fizzles out, with no punch at the finish.

You who have been working to make your characters better know that Bob isn't a very strong one to play the hero's rôle. Joe is more human, but both aren't portrayed vividly enough to make them more than Western types.

Don't let that discourage you, though, Señor Wilson. As you know by this time, we tell you point-blank where your work needs building up and say plumb little about a story's good points. If it didn't have 'em, do you reckon we'd buy it? You bet we wouldn't! You're off to a good start. Try again.

And here's

### PLOT THAT FAILED

By Nora White—Age 33
Huntingdon, Tennessee

On the sunlit prairie a group of longhorns grazed contentedly. A broad-shouldered cowboy lolled in his saddle. He sat

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up quickly as two men rode over a ridge. The older man wore a sheriff's star; the other was a chunky fellow with sullen black eyes.

The sheriff's voice snapped, "Up with your hands!"

The amazed cowboy stared into the black muzzle of a gun.

"What's the trouble?" he gasped.

"You know, yuh murderin' rat!" the chunky hombre snarled. "I found Uncle Jim layin' where yuh dropped him, a slug through his head!"

A chill shot down the cowboy's spine. Visions of the kindly old man who had given him a much-needed job rose before him.

"That's right," growled the sheriff, "Felton come after me soon's he found him. Didn't figure on gittin' yuh so easy." He snapped a pair of handcuffs on the dazed cowboy's wrists and slipped the prisoner's six-gun from a worn holster. "Come on, we'll go on to the house and take the body into town."

Jack Dale's mind whirled as they rode away. Who could have killed Uncle Jim? He was all right when Jack rode out that morning.

A low ranchhouse rose ahead. The sheriff stepped down at the gate. Jack slid off stiffly.

"In there." Felton led the way. They entered a narrow hallway. Felton went through a door, the others following.

"He's layin' right over there," he began, then stopped; his jaw dropped and he stared at the spot where he pointed.

There was no body there. A pool of blood was drying on the floor. That was all.

A sound from behind startled the silent trio. As one man, they whirled. An old man with blood-streaked face and matted white hair stood swaying in the doorway.

"Uncle Jim!" Jack cried, but the old man was not looking at him. His eyes were fixed on Felton, whose face had taken on a greenish hue.

"Yuh yella dog!" the old man's voice shrilled. "Yuh thought yuh killed me, but yuh only creased my head! Figured yuh'd git th' ranch, huh? Well, yuh'll never git it! Yuh ain't no nephew o' mine, yuh sneakin' skunk!"

A wild light glowed in Felton's eyes. His hand slapped to his holster. The sheriff tried to bring his gun to bear on the cursing man. As the killer's gun cleared leather, Jack left the floor in a headlong dive. His shoulder struck Felton squarely in the middle, and the gun flew from his hand. He crashed to the floor with Jack on top of him. A flailing fist caught the cowboy on


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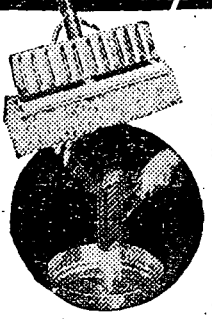

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the side of the head. His manacled hands flashed downward. The steel cuffs crashed against Felton's temple and the man went limp.

"I'll take care of that rat!" The sheriff unlocked the handcuffs, then clasped them on the unconscious Felton.

"Take him away," the old man muttered. Jack caught him as he reeled. "We kin run this ranch, Jack. It'll be yours some day, son."

Well, now, we'll be dad-blamed if this story wasn't written by an old amigo of ours! Not that it helped put the story across; we reckon it did that on its own merit. You've read the poems by this señorita that have a way of showing up in our Corner from time to time.

For a starter in fiction, this story shows a heap of promise. The author has a smooth style that has been polished by her practice in writing verse. The story has action, but the plot could have been handled better by a writer who has had more practice writing fiction. As we've told you before, though, we don't expect too much from you amateurs. The characterization worked into the story supplies the little touches that make the people in it appear to be more than mere names.

We advise you to keep on working to improve as a fiction writer, señorita, but don't neglect your poetry, either. The two team up as plumb good saddle pards.

Speaking of poems, here are a few of 'em: *Copied*

### A VISION

**By Glyn Bostick—Age 16**
**Mobeetie, Texas**

I saw him in the dying light of day,
Mounted upon his faithful chestnut mare,
One hand extended toward the stout beast's neck—
To stroke the strands of chestnut, streaming there.

As he caressed the willing creature's mane,
Its grateful love was mirrored in its eyes;
A love that made the horse and rider one
To share the rugged trail where conquest lies.

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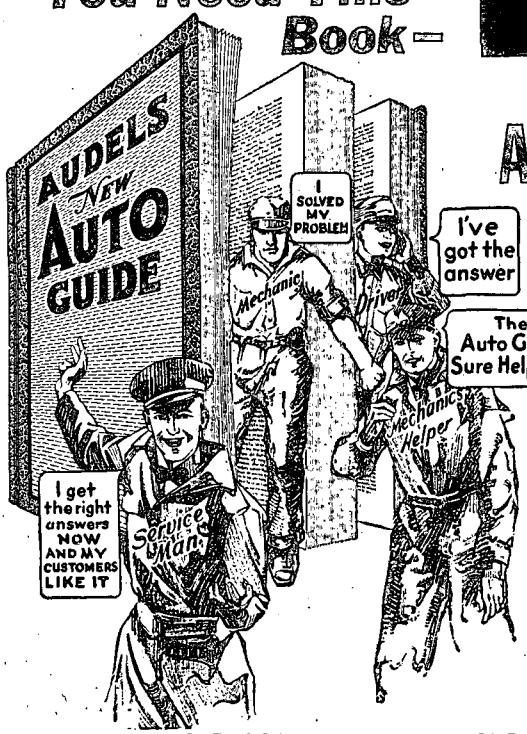


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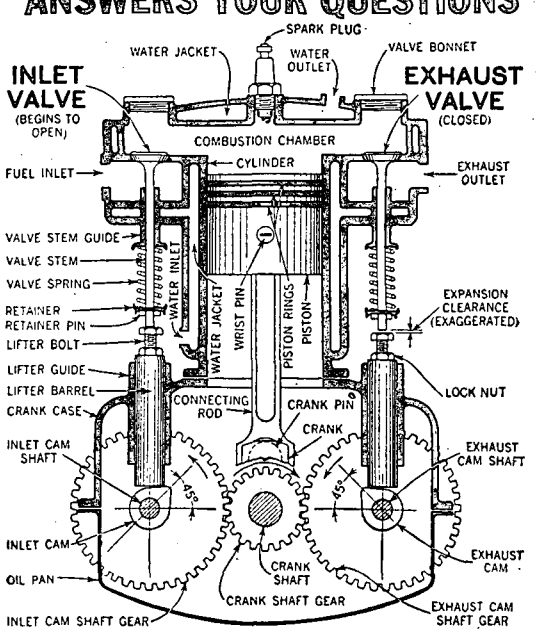


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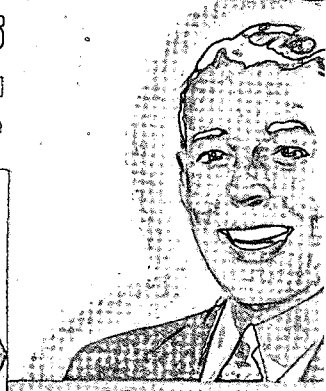

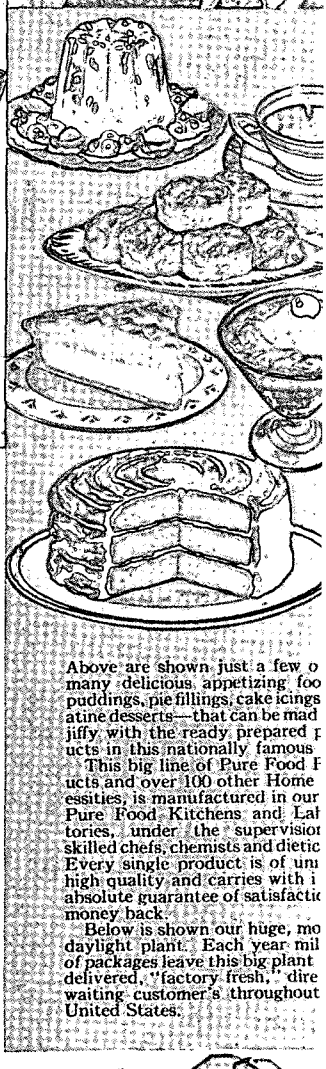

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A big part of every dollar you take in goes into your pocket as clear cash profit. Attractive and unusual Premium Offers, Cut-Price Sales, One Cent Sales, all make your business a most fascinating and profitable all-year-'round occupation.

### EVERYTHING YOU NEED—FREE!

Now, without your paying me one single penny, you can have everything you need to prove to yourself the **thrill** and **profit** of running a simple, dignified business of your own. I will give complete, valuable business equipment—FREE—to one reliable man or woman in each open locality. This Free Money-Making Outfit contains a large assortment of regular full-size packages of the most popular, fastest selling products in the line; a simple, sure-fire Plan that anyone can follow; samples to give away; a *big beautiful catalog of the entire line;* and everything else needed to start making money at once.

### SPLENDID CASH PROFITS

You owe it to yourself to write and see what wonderful success so many other men and women have enjoyed with this simple, money-making Plan. No experience is required. Let me mail you full particulars—then you can judge whether you want to start right in making money at once. In addition to your fine cash earnings, you can get food products and other household necessities for your own use at wholesale prices—so you can **save** money as well as **make** money. This is a sincere offer by an old reliable company. Mail the coupon or a postcard **at once** for my complete, amazingly interesting Plan and my Free Outfit Offer. Do it TODAY!

**E. J. MILLS, President,**
**8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.**

**MAIL COUPON for FREE OFFER**

MR. E. J. MILLS,
8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Please send me at once *full particulars about* your Free Outfit Offer and how you will help me make big cash profits as a Local Distributor for your nationally famous products.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Above are shown just a few o many delicious, appetizing foo puddings, pie fillings, cake icings atine desserts—that can be mad jiffy with the ready prepared p ucts in this nationally famous

This big line of Pure Food F ucts and over 100 other Home essities, is manufactured in our Pure Food Kitchens and Lat tories, under the supervisio skilled chefs, chemists and dietic Every single product is of un high quality and carries with i absolute guarantee of satisfactio money back.

Below is shown our huge, mo daylight plant. Each year mil of packages leave this big plant delivered, "factory fresh," dire waiting customer's throughout United States.

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